

“Fortune’s Fool”

by Jason Lilly

Tom barely heard the slight tinkling of his money as it tapped against the counter. The overhead lights cast a blinding glare that Tom found very unnerving. The short line behind him grew larger by the minute. He could hear gentle, but not yet agitated, groans coming from the man in the back of the line. The petite Asian woman behind the counter stared in disbelief and perplexity as Tom repeated his request.

“Fortune cookies. I want to buy a box of fortune cookies.” The lady’s expression did not change. Under other circumstances, Tom was sure she was a lovely lady, but on this particular afternoon, her face was slightly contorted by her confusion and Tom’s tension made her, at present, his least favorite person on earth. The groaning man behind Tom was in close second.

“Fortune cookies are free, sir,” she whimpered, a soft trace of accent hidden behind her otherwise Americanized dialect. She pointed a delicate finger to the box next to him that was so full it was almost spewing fortune cookies like a geyser onto the tile floor. Tom looked at it, and his head pounded softly, nothing painful but a tender nagging at the back that was making its presence known. He imagined himself bolting to the box, hoisting it from its resting place, and making a break for his getaway car. Unfortunately, his getaway car was a twenty-four-year-old Mercury Sable, and he himself was an aging man of forty-two who had not seen a gym or run a mile in decades. Besides, he would most likely get struck by an oncoming car before he reached his own.

“I don’t want *a* fortune cookie, or even a few fortune cookies, I want a box.” The young girl flinched a little, letting Tom know that his voice escalated more than he intended. The gentleman behind him edged a little closer, and Tom forced his nerves below the surface. *Ten... nine...eight...* “Look, listen to me. I don’t want just a few fortune cookies. I want to buy an entire box. Can I do that?” *...seven...six...five...*

The girl still seemed confused, but her attention began to waver towards the swinging doors behind her. “I’ll go ask my brother,” she mumbled. As she passed through the swinging doors with small portholes that reminded Tom of an old boat his

father once owned, he could just barely make out a few dark-haired figures scrabbling around in the back amidst sizzling pans and gushing bursts of flame. Tom imagined that, in this hot weather, the back room must be close to what hell feels like. Now would be a good time to snatch the box and run. He managed another glance behind him and saw that the line had shortened a little, but the burly man behind him was waiting, arms crossed, his face getting red with impatience. ...two...one...

Before the girl could return, Tom brushed quickly past the large man and ran for the box of fortune cookies. Just after he wrapped his arms around it, something caused him to stumble, and he felt the whole weight of his body dropping closer and closer to the tile floor. He raised his head up in time to see the box spread its contents across the floor in a plastic hiss that rung like a death toll in Tom's head.

When he rose to his feet, he turned to see that all eyes were on him. The Asian girl behind the counter had returned and blinked her brown eyes at him. Even the large man peered at him, bewildered. Ignoring them, Tom hopped to his feet, gathering as many fortune cookies as he could in his arms, and scrambled for the door.

He ignored the few cookies that fell from his grasp as he ran for his car. Struggling with his keys, he finally opened the car door, tossing the cookies into the passenger seat, and started the engine. Sweat tickled his cheeks as he pulled down on the gearshift and backed the car out. He held his breath as he passed a police cruiser, wondering if the lights would flash and light up the sky for him. He stared at the cookies in the passenger seat. Just a little further.

He drove the car faster up the hill, hugging the dotted line as he started prying open the cookies while he drove. This was not an easy task as crumbs fell like confetti across his lap. He never ate the cookies. In fact, he believed fervently that they were bad for you. Nor did he read the tiny messages of wisdom. He was simply interested in the tiny numbers on the back, below the Chinese lesson. He laughed as one of the teeny slips of paper taught him how to say "money" in Chinese.

The spread of the casino's parking lot finally came into view. Tom barely contained his excitement as he tore open the last cookie and dropped the bit of paper in his lap with the rest. He pulled his car into a space, not caring if he was parked straight

or not, and stuffed the ribbons peppered with words of wisdom, Chinese lessons, and lucky numbers into his pocket.

When he opened the doors, his heart stopped. The jingle of hundreds of slot machines was too beguiling to resist. Ignoring the nearby security guard, he rushed to the row of keno machines. The stacks of numbers on the screen were lined up like prison bars, one to eighty. Tom blinked as he saw his reflection in the glass, peering out from behind the bars of numbers, and he wondered about his circumstances. Why was he here? To win money. What would he do with it if he won? Buy a new house; get Gina and the kids back. Get rid of that raggedy-ass Mercury and buy something rich. And what would he do if he didn't win? Well, what did he have to lose? Everything he loved was gone anyway, his family, friends, house, job... all gone. The only hope was to win back the money he had lost, to walk away with more than he had started with ten years ago. To get the jackpot.

Tom dug into his pocket and removed a five dollar bill. A few of the fortunes tumbled out of his pocket to the floor, and he quickly gathered them up. He slid the five into the slot, hoping he would see it again soon, or many more like it, and laid a few of the fortunes across the machine.

"Dad?" The voice was familiar, but so inaudible he wasn't sure he actually heard it. He froze as he read the fortune at the top of the stack. *Something you lost will soon turn up.* Tom was afraid to turn from the bright numbers, worried that the disruption would ruin his luck. Instead, he flipped over the fortune and read off the miniature numbers as he selected them on the scratchy number pad. Besides, there were plenty of other men around, and any of them could have been fathers. "Dad, what are you doing here?" The voice rang from directly behind him, and he struggled to pull his eyes from the screen.

"Andrew," Tom whispered as he stared at his oldest son. He tried his best to drown his remorse with a surprised smile but knew it must have appeared phony. He had not seen or spoken to Andrew in four years. A big part of him wanted to leap out of his seat and squeeze into his son all four missed years of love and affection. "How are you?" He turned away and watched the bright screen as the numbers began to light up.

“Well, I... I came home because I got booted from State. Couldn’t keep my grades up.” Tom’s throat tightened. Andrew had always been a high-performing student. His senior year of high school, he was voted “Most Likely to Succeed”. Tom wondered if there was more to the story. “They’ve cut my student loans. I’m out of money.” Now it came to it. Tom sunk his head and stared at the tiny ribbons of paper and for the first time they did not look like fortunes to him. They were trash, tiny bits of shredded paper thrown into his lap by some stranger. “So some friends and I are out here to win some money, get back in school.”

“You... you can’t.” A rowdy voice shouting for Andrew came from the bar, so he was sure his son hadn’t heard him.

“I’ve got to go, Dad. It was good to see you.” Tom opened his mouth to speak again, but nothing came out. He whispered, *Goodbye* as his eyes dampened. He watched Andrew disappear around the corner as the bell atop the keno machine began to ring. He did not look at it though as he stood from his chair, letting the bits of paper fall like snowflakes to the floor. He tried to ignore the sounds of coins jangling into the slot at his knees as he walked from the Keno machine and peered around the corner. His son was still walking through the aisle of slot machines to his group of friends at the bar.

“Andrew,” Tom shouted. His son stopped and turned; a small smile lighting up his face. “Can I join you?”