

## **Luck**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

O Fortune, like the moon you are changeable, ever waxing, ever waning; hateful life first oppresses and then soothes as fancy takes it; poverty and power it melts them like ice.  
Songs from Benediktbeuern (Carmina Burana).

### 1

The cheap purse dangled, like fruit from the Garden of Eden, from the old lady's left shoulder as she walked laboriously up the hill. She was carrying a bulging grocery bag in the right hand and made her way up the steep sidewalk with mincing steps, a determined grimace on her face.

Had Angus Murphy been compassionate, he would have offered to relieve the old coot of the heavy burden she carried. But being a career petty thief, he focused his attention on the purse. He approached the woman in quick, noiseless steps, grabbed the purse strap, and yanked. It came off her shoulder easily and, in one practiced motion, Angus flipped it off her arm, turned around, and ran downhill.

Trailing him were the old woman's cry of surprise, followed by screams of helpless rage: "Thief! Catch the thief! Help! Catch the bastard...! Help!!"

Angus turned left into the first side street he crossed, ran a block away from the cries, and turned right at the next intersection. Soon the woman's outraged cries were lost in the town's afternoon hubbub. There were no signs of pursuit, and Angus entered an alley to catch his breath and examine the takings.

The purse contained four dollars and change, an embroidered handkerchief, a compact, a comb, and a ticket for the 29 November 1986 Gold Lotto, to be drawn two days hence.

*What a waste*, reckoned Angus. *She must have spent a good chunk of her pension getting this ticket*. He wasn't a gambler and was not sure how much such a ticket would cost, but it was probably more than a pensioner should be laying out.

*Well, at least I got enough to buy me a pint*, decided Angus, tossing the purse into a dustbin on his way to O'Leary's Old Irish Pub.

2

It was not until the following Tuesday, when thumbing through an old copy of *The Courier-Mail*, that Angus saw the small column listing the winners of the previous Saturday's Gold Lotto drawing. He rummaged through his coat's inner pocket and extracted the lottery ticket, the sole remainder of his purse snatching. He compared his ticket to the winning jackpot number:

"08 18 19 25 26 29" – Supplementary numbers: 23 34." His ticket read: "08 18 19 25 26 34."

A wave of excitement went up his spine. The ticket hadn't won the jackpot, but matching five numbers and one supplementary number, was close enough to have won *something*.

He went to the nearest newsagent's that sold Gold Lotto tickets and approached the cashier to present his ticket. The ticket consisted of an original and a carbon copy; the cashier validated both copies of the ticket by inserting the ticket into a designated cash register; the copy was returned to Angus and the original would be kept by the cashier and sent to Merrysall's, the company that ran the lotteries for the Australian States. The man scanned the ticket and looked

on the screen of his brand-new computer. Instantly, there was a loud, emphatic sound and a picture flashed up on the screen: “Sounds like a winner!”

The cashier then said, not a trace of excitement in his voice: “The prize for the 5+bonus this week is 216,734 dollars. Congratulations.”

Angus was excited enough for the two of them: “Fantastic!! How do I collect?”

“Prizes in excess of 500 dollars cannot be paid by a retailer. I will give you a ‘win receipt’ that validates your winning. You must contact Merrysall’s by phone or mail to make arrangements to receive the prize. Here is a printout with all the information you need.” He handed to Angus a printed page and a win receipt that showed him to be the winner of \$216,734.

Angus was taken aback by his inability to get hold of his winnings immediately. He had already decided that with upwards of 200,000 dollars in his pocket he could move to a nice place and live off his winnings without having to lift a finger to do any more work, legal or not, for some, if not most of the rest of his life.

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The number he was given was for an office in Melbourne. He called and a man answered in a controlled, cheerful voice: “Good afternoon, Merrysall’s Customer Care, my name is Frank. How can I assist you?”

Angus answered, trying to sound like a cultured man himself: “Yes, sir. I won a prize in last week’s Queensland’s Gold Lotto drawing and would like to make arrangements to collect it.”

“Oh, how wonderful. Congratulations. May I have the ticket number?”

“08 18 19 25 26 34.”

There was a brief silence on the line and then: “Sir, you are a 5+bonus prize winner! May I please have your account number?”

“Account number?”

“Do you have an account with Merrysall’s into which deposits can be made?”

“No.”

“How did you purchase your ticket?”

“From a vending machine at the grocer.”

“Do you have a win receipt?”

“Yes.”

“You need to mail the win receipt to the Merrysall’s address shown on the receipt. You must put your name and address on the back of the receipt. The prize will be paid by check and mailed to you, providing the validation requirements have been met.”

“Can I bring the receipt in person to one of your offices and collect it there?”

“Only the main office in Melbourne is authorized to make a prize payment on the amount you have won. Where are you located?”

“I’m in Brisbane. I would need to fly or take a train to get to Melbourne.”

“You are welcome to do so, but I would advise you to save the cost and inconvenience of such a trip. If you send your receipt registered mail it will be sure to arrive here safely.”

“Thank you.” Angus said skeptically and hung up.

Angus would have greatly preferred to travel to Melbourne to personally collect his prize. However, he was broke and his income from petty thievery was fluctuating and highly unreliable at best. It could be weeks before he raised enough cash to make such a trip, and he was in no

mood to wait. Having decided what to do with his winnings, he was eager to get started on his new life.

The mail option was full of perils. Not only could his receipt get lost in the mail, but he didn't know where the check should be sent to. He lived in an unattractive group house, whose residents were not even vaguely respectable, and any official letter addressed to him could well be purloined before reaching his hands. Plus, he had no living relatives or friends who could serve as fronts for his transaction.

As a last resort, he paid a visit to O'Leary's. It was two in the afternoon and the bar was deserted. Angus saw the proprietor and bartender, Cillian Doyle, busily setting up for the after-work rush. Cillian was by no means Angus' friend, but at least they were both Irish and on a first name basis. Angus thought of Doyle as a straightforward fellow and probably as honest as any Irishman Angus knew. He approached the counter with some trepidation.

"Hi, Cillian, how's it going?"

Cillian was a little surprised. "Angus. Isn't this a bit early for you?"

"Naw, Cillian, I didn't come for a drink. I just need a favor."

Cillian narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He knew of Angus' lifestyle. "What's that?"

"Nothing much. I'm expecting an important letter from the government. I don't want it to come to the dump where I live. It's nothing of value to anyone else, but someone might steal it just for the fun of it."

"So?"

"Could I have the letter addressed to me, care of the pub? You'd only need to hold it for a day or two tops. I would drop by every day to check on whether it's been delivered."

"What's in it for me?"

“I’ll make you a gift. I don’t know how much, it depends on the take from my next job, but I promise I’ll share whatever I get with you.” Despite his efforts to appear nonchalant, Angus began tapping the counter uncontrollably.

“Why don’t you rent a post office box? Your mail would come in securely there.”

“I checked on that. It would cost me almost two hundred dollars to set up a box, and the postal employees are known crooks.”

“Then why don’t you go to St. Stephen? I’m sure one of the priests there will be glad to help you.”

“I’ve had several run-ins with them local priests. I don’t expect they would receive me with open arms...”

“Sounds like it’s either me or nobody.”

“I’m afraid so, Cillian.”

The bartender thought about it for a few seconds. “OK, I’ll do it. I’ll be on the lookout for your letter and hold it for you when it comes. But I want a five-dollar fee and a guarantee that nothing will happen to me on account of the letter.”

“Deal.”

5

The letter arrived at O’Leary’s five days later. Angus tore the envelope open and extracted a small piece of typewritten paper and his win receipt. There was no check.

*Dear Mr. Murphy: We note that you are requesting that your prize money be forwarded to an alcoholic beverage dispensing establishment. Regretfully, insurance regulations only allow us to send prize checks to the private address of the winner, to*

*maintain accountability and protect from fraud. Please resubmit your win receipt identifying your home address, or present in person at our main offices.*

*"If you need more information on any lottery topic, do not hesitate to call us.*

*"Thank you for being a Gold Lotto patron.*

*"Sincerely,*

Cillian watched with amusement Angus turning purple when he read the letter. As his customer began muttering under his breath, he inquired: "What's the matter, Angus? Bad news?"

"I knew the government would find a way of euchring me out of my money. They're just a bunch of thieves!"

"Come now, Angus" replied Cillian, suppressing a smile. "It can't be that bad."

Angus didn't reply, but rushed out, slamming the door behind him.

"Hey!" cried Cillian. "Where are my five dollars?"

6

There was no way Angus was going to rely on the mail again to collect his prize. He just had to raise enough money for a plane or a train ticket to Melbourne. And he had to do it quickly, because he knew there was only so long a prize could remain uncollected before the claim period expired. In another call to Merrysall's, he learned that his prize would have to be collected within six months of the draw, so he had until next May 29 to go get his money. Of course, he didn't intend to wait that long.

Angus was a diligent thief. He was always on the prowl for snatching purses, absconding with unattended packages left at the entrance of homes, pickpocketing helpless or drunken citizens, pillaging through mailboxes, or the odd bout of shoplifting. He would

commit two or three of these petty crimes a day, but never quite making enough to rise above poverty. He would need to try his hand at something else to pay for his trip.

He started walking around the residential neighborhoods that circled the downtown area, looking for homes that he could break into. After a couple of weeks, his repeated early morning and mid-afternoon surveillances identified a small single story cottage bungalow with a pretty garden out front. Every weekday, a foreign-looking man wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase would leave the house, saying goodbye to nobody. He would return in the late afternoon, again greeted by nobody, and stay indoors the rest of the day.

The third week of his surveillance, Angus drew enough courage to approach the house around noontime and look into the living room through a large side window whose curtains were only partly drawn. The house was dark, quiet and empty.

He went round the back of the house and peered through a gap in the wooden fence. Still no sign of anyone. A scabble up and a jump down, and he was in the back garden. Carefully up the path to the back door, he picked up a large rock from the garden and smashed the small window by the door handle, cringing at the thought of a burglar alarm going off and alerting the neighbors or the police. The only sound he heard was that the shattering of broken glass. He carefully removed the glass shards, turned the Yale lock door knob and quickly entered the back kitchen.

He walked softly down the hallway and looked around the living room. The furniture was nice but bulky. There was a large television set resting on a table in a corner. Again, too heavy to carry. Prints on the walls and knickknacks in an etagere were uninteresting.



He moved on to the next room, across the hall – a combination bedroom and office with an adjoining bathroom. This was clearly the part of the house that saw most use, judging from its disarray. The bed was unmade, with pillows, sheets and blankets jumbled together as if the owner did not have the time or disposition to tidy up. On top of the bed there were random clothes: a shirt, socks, underwear, a pair of gray trousers. Slippers protruded from under the bed, as did a pair of dress shoes.

After a second, Angus' attention was drawn to a desk and chair that sat in a corner of the room. Unlike the bed, the desk was clean and orderly. An Apple computer occupied the center of the desk, with most of the rest taken up by a large table lamp and an elaborate inbox overflowing with papers. Angus sat in front of the desk and proceeded to search its three drawers. In the second drawer there was something he'd not dared hope for: a fake alligator skin wallet bulging with bank notes.

With that in his pocket he was starting to rifle through the rest of the desk when he heard a heavy knocking at the front door and a loud, commanding voice: "Police!"

He jumped to his feet, feeling his adrenaline make his heart beat faster. Should he stay quiet in the hope they would just go away?

Again, the call: "Police! Open up!"

Fear took over, which was not helped by the rug in the hallway almost tripping him up as he headed back into the kitchen. Even with the back door unlocked, he still had trouble getting it open – his panic making his fingers fumble and slip – but within seconds he was out of the house and in the back garden.

As the front door finally yielded to the policemen's attack, Angus raced down the garden path, threw himself against the high back fence, pulled himself up and took one last

look behind him. Through the open kitchen door he could see the police entering the front of the house. That was all the motivation he needed. Pushing himself backwards over the fence he felt his clothing catch and tear, and the next thing he knew he was lying flat on his back on the access road at the back of the bungalow.

He got on his feet, realising he ached and hurt everywhere, but his fear was greater than the physical pain. He limped for a couple of steps and then took off, running as fast as his bruised legs would carry him. He was making his way down the access road to the street adjacent the cottage when a chorus of angry voices erupted:

“There he goes! Catch him!” In the back of his mind, Angus was surprised that so many people would be out of their homes in the middle of a working day, but the only effect of the outcry was to make him run faster. Onto the side street he went, but realized that the only thing that would save him was to find some place to hide up.

Angus ran aimlessly, getting further and further away from the suburbs and into the countryside, but was running out of steam, the adrenaline rush being replaced by fatigue.

Angus slowed down to consider his situation. He was hurt, exhausted, and suffering from severe stress. He stank of sweat. His clothes were ripped and caked with mud. He felt faint and on the verge of passing out. Yet, inside the pocket of his thin coat, he could feel the wallet that had been the prize from his adventure.

Still heading out of town, he came across a group of allotments – one had a dilapidated shack with a large sign painted crudely on its side in white letters: *STRAWBERRIES*. He stumbled towards the shack, intending to force his way inside and get some rest. The door to the shack was open, hanging at an odd angle; it was dark and dank

within, smelling of decay and old age. Angus found some hay on the floor, removed his coat to serve as an improvised pillow, dropped on the ground and sank into a stupor.

He was awakened later by a chorus of approaching barks. Instantly awake, he ran out the door and into the field. Too late, though. Dogs and police handlers were approaching and caught up to him barely twenty yards from the shack.

As he was being taken away, Angus started to shiver. He thought he was having a nervous breakdown, but then he realized he had left his coat behind in the shack.

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One of the first questions Angus asked of the public defender assigned to his case was: “How come they sent a full squad of police, dogs and all, to track me down? I’m just a petty thief and didn’t even get to steal anything!”

The young lawyer was surprised. “Haven’t they told you? They want you as a witness.”

“Witness to what?”

“When the police arrived at the house they tried to identify the owner so they could notify him of the break-in. None of the neighbors knew the guy, so the police went through the papers on his desk and found his name: Mete Veziroglu. Further investigation revealed that Mr. Veziroglu runs a drug-smuggling ring and is on INTERPOL’s most wanted list. They arrested him and are putting together a case to send him away for life. They want you to corroborate some aspects of the matter.”

The attorney leaned back in his chair. “I’m talking to the prosecution, trying to cut a deal for you. You have two prior convictions, so they are unwilling to let you get off Scot free, but they may settle for a few months sentence and probation.”

“That’s good news, but please try to keep my jail time to a minimum. I’ve been there already and don’t much enjoy it.”

8

For a rookie, Angus’ assigned defender did a creditable job negotiating a plea bargain. In a closed-door hearing, Angus appeared before a stern judge who questioned him on why he should be let off with only a four-month sentence, at the end of which he was likely to return to a life of crime. Angus appeared contrite, and swore with feigned sincerity that this last experience had cured him of any desire to break the law even in the slightest bit. The judge retorted:

“Well, Mr. Murphy, I will approve the settlement, but if I see you in this court again, I’ll lock you up and throw away the key. You are sentenced to four months imprisonment and one-year probation under the supervision of the Parole Board Queensland.”

Angus appeared as a witness in Mr. Veziroglu’s trial and testified that, in the course of his burglary, he had occasion to read certain compromising documents (which he had memorized, as instructed by the prosecuting counsel). On cross-examination, he was questioned by the defense lawyer about a wallet containing over three hundred dollars in cash. Angus was surprised at the amount in the wallet, which he never had time to ascertain, but avowed complete ignorance of its whereabouts. He felt no guilt at uttering such a lie, because stealing from a sleazebag like Veziroglu was not stealing at all.

9

Angus was released from jail on May 4, 1987, barely three weeks before his prize expired. He was wearing the same clothes he had on when arrested; a pocket in his pants still held the win receipt.

He was out of options. Stealing again was out of the question, since the parole office kept tabs on him and any attempts at purse snatching or mailbox tampering was likely to land him in jail again. He also felt reluctant to resume his former life, out of fear that the luck which had protected him so far would eventually run out.

He had no money. His room in the group home had been ransacked, and the landlady had kept only the few items of his clothing she had not been able to sell. She insisted on keeping those against the rent he still owed. Finally, Angus borrowed some money from Cillian (who was not particularly happy to see him) and went to a charity shop where he got used pants, a shirt and a light jacket. He then started to retrace his failed escape route.

What with his hazy memory of the events, after some difficulty, he found he relocated the shack with a fading *STRAWBERRIES* sign on the side. He rushed to it.

The door still hung precariously from one hinge; the rank smell of age and decay filled his nostrils. He moved to the back of the room, where a dark lump rested on a bed of long decayed hay.

Angus picked up the abandoned coat and shook it. There was a squeak and one or two small creatures fell to the ground. Angus held the coat gingerly and took it outside into the light. The coat was ruined – the sleeves and collar had been gnawed and were now full of ragged holes. Angus, fearing an attack from hidden vermin, turned the garment inside out and felt the inner pocket. The wallet was still there.

Well, not quite. The wallet had also been attacked by the energetic mice. Portions of the material had been bitten off; what remained exhibited many tiny tooth marks. But what about inside?

Some of the bank notes had been eaten away, others were torn or had pieces missing. Angus took out what was left and did a melancholic inventory. About \$200 or so were sufficiently complete that they could perhaps be traded in a bank for new money. The rest were gone or had been reduced to a disgusting pulp. Angus sighed and pocketed what could be salvaged, hoping that what he had would be enough to get him to Melbourne.

10

The cheapest air fare available was over \$90; travelling by train cost as little as \$65. He opted for the train, since he would need some extra cash to stay in the city and travel to Merrysall's offices. It would be tight, but he expected he would be a rich man on his return home.

Angus spent the next two days going to bank after bank to trade the damaged bills for fresh ones, eating a frugal meal or two, and sleeping outdoors. At the end he had \$183 dollars in fairly new notes. He walked to the train station and purchased a one-way ticket. The next train didn't leave until 4:30 AM the following day, so he curled up under a banyan tree in the Roma Street Parkland near the terminal.

He woke up with a start. He did not own a watch, but it was starting to get light. He ran to the station and arrived as they were boarding the train. He checked in, found himself a seat in a quiet corner of a carriage and fell asleep again.

Many, many hours later, after changing trains in Sydney, he was shaken awake by a conductor. "Time to wake up, mate. We've arrived." A clock on the wall read 7:30 AM of May 28, 24 hours after his departure.

Angus arrived in Melbourne too tired to get any business done. The following day was the deadline for cashing his prize, six months after the draw.

He spent \$25 getting a room in a cheap boardinghouse. He figured he needed to be fresh and ready for whatever the next day might bring. The following morning, he showered, shaved and had breakfast. He then splurged by taking a cab that transported him to the building that housed Merrysall's offices.

He arrived as the offices were opening and asked for the department in charge of paying out prizes. He was ushered to a small, pleasantly appointed room with plump chairs circling a mahogany table, decorated soothingly in green wallpaper and sporting Victorian prints in fancy gilded frames.

He sat in that office for almost half an hour before an official made his entrance. The man was in his fifties, impeccably dressed in a gray suit, blindingly white shirt, and a silver necktie. He proffered a limp hand to Angus and introduced himself:

"Good morning. Sorry to keep you waiting, but you know how busy things can get on Fridays. I am Alistair Granville. How do you do?"

"Angus Murphy," he responded with a trace of hesitation in his voice.

"Well, Mr. Murphy, I take it that you've come to claim your prize. May I please see your win receipt?"

Angus extracted the receipt and Granville looked at the date, got up, and went to a bookcase at the back of the room that contained a series of identical black binders with titles and dates on their spines. He looked for one, found it, and returned to the table with

it. He opened it and ran his finger down the third page, comparing the entries in the book against the ticket. He turned to Angus and smiled.

“This ticket is good for a prize of \$216,734.”

“Correct,” responded Angus, getting a little impatient.

“But...” Mr. Granville paused for a moment.

“But what?”

“Under the Gold Lotto Terms and Conditions, a person may file a report within thirty days of the draw in question, asserting that he or she is the rightful owner of a winning ticket and that the ticket had been stolen. One such a report, concerning this ticket, was filed by a Mrs. Gertrude Wallis a day after her ticket was allegedly purloined. The report was supported by an affidavit from one Eugene Morris, the manager of a Jack the Slasher Food Barn supermarket where the ticket was allegedly purchased. Mr. Morris states that he knows Mrs. Wallis well, since she is a frequent customer at that establishment, and that two days before the draw she purchased this ticket. The store keeps duplicate copies of the lottery tickets it sells, so Mr. Morris was able to reconstruct the transaction and allow Mrs. Wallis to file her stolen ticket claim.” He paused for a second and crossed his hands over his lap.

“Mr. Murphy, we have a dispute here. Under the Terms and Conditions of the Gold Lotto, we are required to investigate the dispute and determine whether you or Mrs. Wallis is the rightful owner of this ticket. Since she claims that the ticket was stolen from her by you, the police will be a part of the investigation. My secretary will be calling them presently.”

Angus turned very pale. “So, you won’t be paying me my prize?”



“Not today. However, since both you and Mrs. Wallis have asserted your rights in a timely manner in accordance with the Terms and Conditions of the Gold Lotto, once the investigation is completed one or the other will be disbursed the prize amount.”

“How long will this investigation take?”

“It’s all in the hands of the police. If you can provide evidence that you obtained this ticket legally, the matter might be resolved in a day or two and you will be able to leave with your prize money.”

That was the end of the road for Angus, and he knew it. The moment the police started looking into the dispute his past record and the three convictions would be spotted. “So. what do I need to do now?”

“For the moment, just let me have your local address so that you can be contacted by the police. I would advise you to stay in town, because if you were to leave without clearing this matter up that could be construed as an admission of guilt.”

12

Angus returned to the boarding house, dejectedly, trying to think through his predicament. In a day or two, he would be out of money, unable to stay in Melbourne and unable to leave. He bought a half bottle of cheap whiskey and downed it in less than thirty minutes. He fell asleep with his clothes still on.

In the morning, he received a call from Mr. Granville asking him to present himself as soon as possible at Merrysall’s offices. Angus knew this was his death sentence, but could think of no alternative but to attend. This time he walked the couple of miles to the Merrysall’s building. On arrival, he was bathed in cold sweat, but his mind was made. He would turn himself in.

Granville was as impeccably dressed as the day before, but seemed less composed. He sat across the table from Angus and, without preamble, dove into the matter at hand. "Mr. Murphy, we did some work yesterday."

Angus readied to make a fully confession, but Granville went on. "We ran a background check on you and learned of your previous problems with the law, including a house break-in several months ago." Angus bowed his head and said nothing.

"We also tried to reach Mrs. Wallis but the telephone number listed in the stolen ticket report has been disconnected. As a backup, we contacted Mr. Morris, who advised that Mrs. Wallis had a heart attack and passed away last month. When we inquired as to the next of kin, Mr. Morris indicated that Mrs. Wallis was a widow who lived alone and had no known relatives. So here we are. We have every reason to believe that you stole Mrs. Wallis' lottery ticket but have nobody to whom we can award the prize she won. And we are unwilling to reward you for your crime. We will fight you in court if necessary, but you won't get the two hundred thousand dollars."

There was a momentary pause and Granville went on: "The Merrysall's Board of Directors has authorized me to offer you a lump sum payment of five hundred dollars in exchange for your signing a full waiver of any rights to compensation you might feel you have in connection with this prize." He produced from his briefcase a typewritten document and placed before Angus. "Take it or leave it" he advised curtly.

Angus sighed. He'd known all along that the government would find a way of euchring him out of the prize. But five hundred dollars was still better than nothing.

"Where do I sign?" he asked.

T H E   E N D