

NG

by Paul Hargreaves

Sammy doesn't tell anyone about this ritual she performs every Friday evening, or why she does it in her particular way. She seems a very private person, probably even with people who are close to her. Not like most customers. Strangers talk to me about all kinds of highly personal things as they scan the headlines at my newspaper stand — how a tax increase is pinching them already, even before it hits, or how their nephew got shot up in the Middle East. It's like they need to connect to the headlines somehow and bring the news into their own lives. I believe it gives them a feeling of importance in the world.

But not Sammy. She just goes about her business, which I find out involves minding her own store, Jasper's Shoes. She started it several years ago before the neighbourhood turned around. She bought the building cheap and now the whole block is booming with high-rent boutiques. She picks up the Times every day at lunch and goes straight to the stock pages while I flirt with her because it's good for business. She knows I'm just messing with her but she clarifies the point, about how she never dates I mean.

Sammy's store turns a good buck, especially on the swishy imports, and there's an investment account to prove it, although nobody who knows her is likely to suspect this. She's always nicely turned out, but not in a showy way that suggests money. Nor does she chit-chat with me about this kind of thing as she buys her newspapers. So how do I know all this about Sammy, you ask? I'm getting to that...

It has to do with the lottery tickets she buys on her way to the movies every Friday evening. It's always a pair, always from the same guy, Damon, at a stand he runs near the cinema. "Two zippy picks" she always says, meaning random numbers the computer spits out so you don't have to think about it. And she always wants them on separate tickets, which Damon remembers because it would be simpler and more usual for him to print just one ticket. He hands

her the two tickets and, always in the same order, she writes two letters in the corner of each ticket. It's always the same on the first ticket: SJ. But on the second one it always changes; the most recent ticket, for example, she marks "NG."

Damon will tell you that lots of his lottery customers have quirky habits. They might kiss the ticket three times, or place it in a particular slot in their billfold, or maybe behind a picture of their kids. Damon never questions or comments on any of this sort of thing; he feels that it would be like discussing religion or politics or sex.

The reason for the letters on the tickets is this: it is a kind of bet that she makes with — I don't know what to call it — fate, or lady luck, or maybe god or something like that. She tells me it's a kind of atonement (that being the word she uses: atonement) for presuming to think that maybe she, of all people, might be the one-in-a-zillion winner. And in writing the letters on the ticket, she makes this promise to herself and to this mystical force: if the first ticket wins — the one marked SJ — she keeps the money for herself and quietly slips it into her investment portfolio. But if the other number comes up, she swears that every penny will go to a complete stranger — someone who has treated her nicely that week. She tells nobody about this arrangement. She just goes quietly along with the plan from week to week and month to month, and always she repeats the routine and the quiet promise to herself that if she wins she will actually do this.

That's Sammy's story. But on the day about which I am now speaking, I know nothing of it. I don't even know her name. All I know is that on this particular Friday, she stops by my stand at quitting time. She needs to have a word with me, she says. And I'm thinking that maybe she has reconsidered her vow to never date, because she seems a bit nervous about having a word with me. And I am, after all, a person of no average charms, if you ask me.

"Come have a little chat with me over a coffee at Biolik's," Sammy says.

Now I'm sipping hot coffee while Sammy tells me this story of her life and of her shoe business and so on. I'm thinking she should spare herself the shop talk and cut straight to the question. I've got zero plans and Sammy'd be a not-too-painful person to spend a Friday evening with.

Then she tells me this story of her lottery tickets — I don't know, maybe to show her sensitive side. But I don't much care. I'm past all that and more than ready to spring for buttered popcorn.

Sammy then opens her clutch and smooths a slip of paper onto the table with great dignity and purpose. The paper is marked with two hand-written letters in the corner and has tick marks beside each printed number. She's watching me very closely.

"I do not even know your name," she says to me, and I start to tell her but she stops me. "No," she says. "Nothing should change." Then she points to the paper. "You know what this is?" she asks.

"Sure," I say, "it is a lottery —" but I stop as I see the check marks beside each number. And I remember the story in all the day's papers about some big lottery prize — ten million and change it says — won by an as-yet unknown person right here in the city. And before I can fit all of these pieces together, she gets up to go, leaving the ticket on the table.

"It's yours," she says as she opens the door to go to the movies and to stop at Damon's stand to buy a pair of lottery tickets, and to mark them with letters as is her Friday evening routine. "You've always been very nice to me," she says. I try to pick up the ticket with fingers that are suddenly too shaky for the task.

"You — you want me to go with you?" I finally manage to stammer. "To the movies or something?"

"Just send me flowers sometime," she says. "See you Monday, newspaper guy."

