

**another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory**



**THE CLERK** by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | June 2018

## **The Clerk**

by Mike Bozart

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As far as American convenience store clerks go, he was a ways from waxing stereotypical. Sure, age-wise, he fit the mold; plenty of mid-20-somethings work the center-stage-stressful, often-encircled-by-foul-mood-patrons retail gig. But he had this calm, sage-for-his-age, super-courteous, urbane demeanor. It was readily apparent that he could be employed elsewhere. *Why in the world is he working here?* I wondered behind the 60-ish African American man who reeked of booze. No, this clerk was not my-hopeless-life-is-undergoing-its-third-train-wreck distressed like his coworkers. He actually seemed like a mole from the Phoenix (Arizona) headquarters. I mused while waiting. *Maybe he's secretly surveilling the employees. Then later he transmits reports from some swank studio apartment in 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward. [Charlotte, NC] Yeah, he's most likely a corporate plant doing in-store quality assurance.*

I was now first in line at his register. The digital clock atop the cigarette display read 6:16. It was a hot-as-hell June (2017) Thursday evening and the store's air conditioning wasn't keeping up; it had fallen way behind hours ago and had resigned the contest. *How far away is October? Please let this be my last scummer [sic] in this sweathole. [sic] Let me win and get the eff [sic] out of here!*

"What can I do for you?" the short-dark-haired, Southeast-Asian-appearing clerk politely asked, noticing that I had set nothing down on the counter. *This red-haired dude doesn't look like a robber. Though, he does look like he may be from ALE. [Alcohol Law Enforcement] Nope. He looks familiar. Yeah, he was wearing a college-logoed shirt last week. He's that safety guy. Mike?*

I extracted a neatly folded Powerball ticket from my black wallet and handed it to the ever-observant clerk. *Sure hope he knows how to do this.*

"Could I replay these numbers for the next drawing this Saturday?" I asked. *Another Powerball addict. If I only had a dime for every one, I'd be sailing in the Adriatic [Sea] right now. Well, maybe not right now; it's past midnight.*

"Certainly, Mike," he replied. *Good, he knows how to do it – unlike that befuddled woman last time.*

He soon returned with a new ticket in his right hand and the now-known-to-be-a-loser ticket in his left hand.

“You want the old one?” he asked, flexing his tan left wrist.

“Nah, you can trash it,” I told him. “I’ve already recorded the numbers.” *But, it’s the same series of numbers. Another weird logger. More material for my paper.*

“Well, maybe it’s the winning line on your ledger.” *Ledger? How’d he know?*

“I sure hope so,” I replied. “I’m running out of space on my chart.” *Ah, a charter, [sic] also. He’ll be good for a page. Or two.*

“So, you’re tracking the frequencies. Are you looking for patterns?” *I’ll just throw that out to see if he runs with it. Bet he employs some harebrained strategy.*

“Just playing the least-plucked balls,” I answered. *Not a totally dumb idea. Maybe he knows some probability.*

“Sounds like a smart plan to me.” *Still a foolish venture, though. Just one notch up from completely witless.*

“Do you play any of the lotteries?” I enquired.

“Mega Millions once per moon. I just stick a toe in the water from time to time. That way I just lose a dollar. A buck a month is my high-stakes budget.” He allowed a slight grin. *Just a once-in-a-while. [sic] I bet that he lets the computer randomly pick his numbers. ‘A toe in the water.’ Maybe he’s afraid of losing his foot ... -ing.*

“I see,” I casually acknowledged. “Very smart.” *I know that he thinks otherwise. He has that gambler mindset: My method will win any day now. Such an insidious disease.*

“Ok, that will be two dollars, Mike.” *Wonder what he really thinks of lotteries. / Habitual lottery players, the stupidity-tax payers. And, he’s a technical specialist. He should know better. Maybe his friend won some money, and now he is out for his lucky strike. He feels that it’s his turn now. He’s due. Due-lusional. Another jackpot crackpot.*

I handed him two old-and-crumpled-and-somewhat-ragged \$1 bills. “Thanks,” I said as I turned to leave, noticing a now-irritated-by-the-additional-seven-seconds-of-wait-time, white, middle-aged, male, face-sunburned-despite-donning-a-plain-blood-red-baseball-cap, beer-buying customer. *A 12-pack for a Thursday night? Maybe he has tomorrow off.*

“Good luck,” the clerk decreed. *Why did he have to say that? This ticket is jinxed now. Oh, why do I think such nonsense? What he says or does here has no effect on the Tallahassee [Florida] drawing. Or, does it? Oh, that’s just quasi-quantum-quandary thinking.*

The next Wednesday I was in the same convenience store at about the same time to buy another Powerball ticket. The clerk from last time was there reading a magazine, as there were no queued customers at the moment. I strolled up to the counter with my nil-matches-out-of-six ticket in hand.

“Want me to check and see if you’ve won anything?” he asked.

“No, that’s ok; I already know it’s a loser,” I stated. “But, could you replay the numbers again?” *Gluttons for monetary punishment, these fantasists are.*

“Can I ask you a quick question?” the clerk interposed.

“Sure,” I replied. *Hope he doesn’t want to sell me ‘propitious’ numbers like that guy on Central. [Avenue] What a racket he has going. Wonder if he has been busted yet.*

“Why do you play the Powerball game?” He looked serious, like he was taking mental notes.

“Why, should I be playing the scratch-offs?” I started to chuckle.

“Oh, I would not advise that. I was merely curious.”

“Well, to be honest, it’s a very-ho-hum-to-suddenly-tragic story. I’m chasing a mirage now. I’ll admit it. I wrote a couple of short stories about it.” *[Powerballed and That Day]*

“Ah, so you’re a writer. I’m writing my master’s thesis now.” *Knew that he was up to something beyond his current employment. A right-on-the-money hunch.*

“What’s it on?” I asked.

“Gambling sociology. Working here is helping me to write it. I’m already up to fifty-nine pages. Seventy-two pages is the target length.” *Why seventy-two?*

“Oh, I see. Have you noticed any commonalities?”

“Well, the chronic scratch-off ticket purchasers – mostly – are the ones who appear least able to afford such a bad habit. The uptown professionals will occasionally buy a single Powerball or Mega Millions ticket, but the hardcore scratch-off crowd will often buy ten or even twenty tickets at a time, when that \$20 bill that they tender seems to be all that they have – their whole life’s savings. It’s haplessly wishful thinking.” *Yep, he’s right.*

“Yeah, those scratch-off junkies can’t wait; they want their payday right here and now,” I opined. *They want a jug of whiskey right here and now. [There was a county-run liquor store (ABC) next-door.]*

“They sure do. And going by their indigent looks, they may not have a TV, computer or smartphone, or access to the internet to know the winning Powerball or Mega Millions numbers,” the clerk added. *Probably so.*

Suddenly a tattooed, bleach-blonde, 40-or-thereabouts, über-tanned, alligator-skinned woman walked up behind me. *A customer. Time to shut my yap and get going.*

“Well, if you don’t see me again, you’ll know that my system finally synched,” I said as I began heading for the door. *He’ll be back. / Why did I have to say that? Another ticket ruined.*

The next day, another sun-scorching Thursday, I was walking into that East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street convenience store once again. And, yes, that certain clerk was in there. He was finishing up a snacks-and-soda sale with a black, male, waist-of-pants-sagging-way-down, Hanes®-boxer-underwear-advertising teenager.

Before I could say anything, he was motioning for me to give him my previous, already-known-by-him-to-be-a-dud ticket. “Replay, right?”

“You know it,” I replied. *Such a safe bet.*

He returned with my new Powerball ticket 13 seconds later. “It’s still only two dollars,” he proclaimed. *Still?*

“Oh, is it going up to three dollars in the near future?” I asked.

“Possibly,” he informed. “I just learned that the cost of a Mega Millions ticket is increasing to two dollars in late

October. Did you know that Powerball tickets were originally only a dollar?" *Is that correct? Wait ...*

"Uh, yeah, that's right. I remember those days. I think that three dollars, though, would scare off a lot of current customers. Don't you?"

"Well, scratch-off ticket prices go up to \$30. [in North Carolina] It would allow the jackpots to grow to a billion dollars or more. And as history has shown, the higher the jackpots get, the more frenzied the ticket-buying becomes."

"What would you do with a billion dollars?" I asked him point-blank.

"Disappear," the clerk said without a hint of emotion.

"I heard that," I concurred. "Me, the wife and son would vanish, too. We'd leave America. Maybe take up residence somewhere in the Alps."

The following Tuesday I was back for another replay. The clerk wasn't there.

When I asked about him, the petite Latina employee divulged, "Htet quit last Sunday." *Guess he had enough.*