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A Cold November

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A COLD NOVEMBER

Leaves swirled silently from the towering trees lining Lakeshore Drive. Most fell in blazes of color to the sidewalks below to scatter about at the feet of passerby, while others occasionally became airborne again, kicked by the hurrying pedestrians and spun around at the will of the winds. One such leaf, a magenta-hued large red maple, floated across a guard rail, down towards the river below and settled onto the brim of a riding cap perched at an angle atop the head of Gonzo Roosevelt.

Gonzo at the time was piloting his barge up the Chicago River to its berth along the immense docks of the east-side wharf. Gonzo, an aged, often smiling man, had graying eyebrows, a large nose, high cheekbones and deep-set brown eyes that shimmered with every casual glance. His wool-lined leather coat kept him warm against the harsh Chicago winds that blew up and down the river, carrying his frosty breath away with each gust.

Gonzo had been raised in Detroit, the son of a longshoreman whose wife had died a few years after Gonzo was born. A fairly good student in high school, "The Gonz" had tried several other areas of employment before following his calling as a barge pilot. This was the work he loved: the slow, steadfast sputtering of the stout craft, pushing onward through parting waters, half-frozen to a deep blue hue. He was married to his work; when on break, often deep in thought, he would simply eat his lunch upon a nearby wooden piling, its top hammered to a flowing, glassy smoothness by an ancient pile driver, and watch the boats go up and down the stolid river.

One icy November morning Gonzo maneuvered his barge up to a side canal in the private sector; he had been assigned the delivery of bulky electrical transformers to a warehousing facility far south of his usual route. It was near five in the morning; Gonzo had volunteered for the dark, chilly hours out of sheer love for the work, something he rarely saw in the other barge captains. A bulky nautical radio kept him company; right now it was dictating a weather report to the Windy City. A frigid arctic wind urged him to turn up the collar of his lambswool jacket; after doing so he plunged a frozen hand, shivering and numbed by the icy steel of the steering wheel, into the depths of his coat pocket. Gazing at the gnarled paw that was left piloting the barge, Gonzo whimsically thought that it now resembled more closely the bark of the ancient riverbank oak tree that bore his and Loretta's initials than the youthful hand that had carved them there so long ago on a lazy autumn afternoon.

In his pocket he found a ticket stub, colored in all hues of the rainbow, that he had purchased from a lottery machine some days before. He recognized the faintly etched call letters of his tug translated into numbers, 79355, on the side of the ticket. What could have possibly come over him at the time to waste his money like that he had no idea; perhaps it was a little of the Christmas Spirit overpowering his prided sense of thrift, or maybe just an off-the-wall splurge for no reason in particular. But whatever the case,

it was a damn foolish waste of money, he thought, and with a deft flick of his hand he made as though to throw the ticket over the side.

But somehow it remained on his hand, despite several efforts to shake it off. Surprised, he suddenly realized he had forgotten about a wad of gum wrapped in its paper near the corner of his pocket; a part of the gum had affixed itself to the stub and now was stuck firmly to both his hand and the ticket. The ticket seemed to grow warmer despite the cutting edge of the air around him; his mind wandered to thoughts of the scarlet Jaguar he'd always wanted, or the alabaster chateau by the hillside, or the prize golden tenor saxophone shining through the music store window he had so often fogged up with his breath as a child...

Hogwash! One in a million. Never happen to him anyway, he thought. Why, it'd be more trouble than it would be worth, what with taxes taking away half of it and all of his friends begging and stomping down his door for the other half.

Still, wouldn't it be nice to

With a swift tearing motion he ripped the stub to shreds; first halves, then quarters, then eighths, and flicked them over the guard rail to the opaque blue-black waters that lay some twenty feet below the high command post steering the ship.

Well, that's over and done with, he thought. To catch the tail end of the forecast he turned up the radio and listened attentively.

"... with moderate winds and sudden snowstorms approaching early this morning. And as a service of your local radio station, today's daily lottery numbers: seven, nine,"

Gonzo, hesitating for a moment upon hearing the first few numbers of the broadcast, abruptly and impulsively flicked off the old maritime receiver, protesting with static.

On the side of the barge, below the guard rail, their size seemed far out of perspective; painless they lofted downward: alabaster, gold, scarlet; all tumbling languidly end-over-end and side to side, like autumn leaves not at all discouraged by the killing frost.

Glenn Ward