

The Grand Poobah

“Give me a megabucks ticket,” said Joey.

“Only one” said the kid behind the counter.

“You only need one” Joey said “and a pack of lights” motioning to the cigarette picture on the counter. “3, 7, 10, 19, 58 and 83. Good numbers,” he thought as he pushed the ticket into his wallet and lit up before he got to the car. Joey’s life had been reduced to hoping he could win the lottery, after decades of wasted opportunities and bad decisions.

Joey’s parents came from Italy during the great wave of immigrants in the 1920s, opening a grocery store in Newark. Good Catholic boys, they attended Mass twice a week. Joey did whatever his parents asked and did well in school. He was a happy and bright boy. But his father favored Nick, the first-born. “Poppa, why does Nickie get a new suit for church?” he asked.

Joey’s father smiled and patted him on the head. “Nickie needs a new suit because he’s going to be an altar boy. You’ll be one in a few years and then we’ll get you a new suit.”

But Joey knew it was more than that. Nick got better toys at Christmas and more attention from his parents. Even though he was a better student, Joey would be criticized if he didn’t get all ‘A’s’. Nick would be praised for getting ‘B’s’.

“Fourth grade is harder than first grade Joey,” his father explained. “We’ll see how you do then.”

Now in his late 50s, Joey looked like Ernest Borgnine, another first generation Italian-American, but without his talent or work ethic. His life more closely resembled Ralph Kramden, the poor bus driver on *The Honeymooners*, wearing a raccoon hat at the lodge. He walked into the Italian-American club and sat down at the card table. “Ciao, come stai,” said Joey.

“Bene, bene” replied the other players.

“Give me \$300” pulling most of the cash from his wallet and taking his chips.

“Feeling lucky today Joey?” said Mike.

“I gotta believe, Mike, you know that,” gambling now his religion.

Joey and his brother Nick worked at the grocery. Nick would be at the cash register while Joey bagged food. One time a tomato slipped from the top of the bag to the bottom, breaking when the customer put it in his car. He returned to complain. His father stared at Joey. “Tomatoes go on top. Give the man a new one and it’s coming out of your allowance.”

He had joined the Masonic order to make connections for sales. In 1983, the church had reiterated their denouncement of Freemasonry. Rejected by his faith, Joey believed that he was in a state of grave sin, thus justifying the downward spiral his life had taken. His younger son was brain damaged at birth and given up to an institution for life, a common practice in the 1950s; his other son had a compromised pulmonary system, probably related to the smoking addiction he and his wife shared.

“Poppa, I made this for you in art class.” Joey handed his father the watercolor with a picture of them both standing in front of the store.

“Where’s Nickie and your mother?” his father said. “This is just me and you.” *Just*. Joey held back tears.

Eventually, Joey stopped trying to please his father. This led to his smoking, gambling and eating addictions.

Joey thumbed his cards, a 4, 7, jack, queen and king. He looked around the table. “Two cards” he said, then took another cigarette out. In high school, Joey was an all-state lineman. But today, at 5’10” and 300 pounds, Joey was closer to a heart attack than a running attack. “C’mon, give me picture cards” he thought to himself as he looked at his hand. Catching an ace and ten, he now held a straight. “I raise” and he threw \$40 in the pot.

Two players threw in their cards, “not with this hand” said one.

Mike glanced over his hand to Joey. “All right. I’ll play” and he raised him to \$100.

Joey blew some smoke out, looked at his chips; realizing most of his paycheck was on the table. “All in” and he pushed \$300 in chips into the middle.

Mike looked at his cards again, checked his wallet, and then gave Joey a smile. “Call.” Joey smiled back, laid down his cards and reached for the pot.

A natural talker, Joey had passed up an offer to become the first salesman for a new business venture, frozen orange juice. His gambling addiction and progressive depression kept his wife and son in poverty, even losing a house that his father had bought him years before.

“All hearts” said Mike as he laid down his flush.

A little embarrassed now, Joey finished his cigarette, strained to push away from the table and turned to walk out. “You beat me again Mike.”

Walking back to his car, his legs were knocked under him. A punk kid held a knife to his back and took his wallet. “Move and I’ll stick you, old man.” *Old man*. The youth disappeared down an alley. Trembling, Joey got in his car and drove home.

His wife could tell something was wrong when he came into the kitchen. “What happened?” She said.

“I was mugged. They got my paycheck for the week.” Dejected from the theft but glad that he didn’t have to tell her about the loss at cards, Joey sat quietly and ate his pasta, then left to watch television. His wife came in from the kitchen. Joey fell asleep, partly from his smoking, obesity and depression, partly from the trauma of being held up. His wife changed the channel, as her show was about to come on when she saw the blonde model reading the numbers for the night.

“3, 7, 10, 19, 58 and 83.”