



3-15-1994

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Recommended Citation

Matthews, Jack (1994) "Wasted Tickets," *Westview*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol13/iss3/3>

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WASTED TICKETS

Jack Matthews

When Gavin was taking his shower, he heard his wife, Mavis, scream, and his first thought was that they'd won the lottery. But he was mistaken, for she had just received a phone call from her mother, saying that her father had died of a heart attack.

Gavin was showering after finishing his workout in his basement home gym at 6:15 according to schedule so he'd be ready for dinner, which they always ate at seven. The lottery was announced on Channel 8 every Wednesday at exactly 6:30, and he knew that his wife, Mavis, had splurged more than usual this week, buying twenty tickets.

She'd told him about buying the twenty tickets at breakfast, and he'd frowned down at his cinnamon oatmeal and toast, muttering something about it being her money. This wasn't altogether true, because actually the money she regularly wasted on lottery tickets would have been a significant help for the family budget...if she had possessed more self control, as he sometimes pointed out to her. She knew he didn't approve, but went ahead and played the lottery anyway. After all, she pointed out in return, he would share equally in whatever she won. And anyway, wasn't she making extra money working half-time doing accounts for Ezio's, a local pizza enterprise?

The owner of Ezio's was a worried and cynical man named Howie Bender, who'd told Mavis one time that he'd named his pizza palace for a great operatic basso who'd been famous when he was a

kid. She couldn't exactly remember his name, even though Howie was always referring to him; but she could have sworn it sounded almost exactly like "pizza."

"That's the trouble," Howie, who was discouraged middle-aged, fat and bald, complained to her miserably one evening; "what good's a really great and wonderful pun if nobody knows what you're talking about? 'Ezio's Pizza'—that's really one-hundred percent brilliant, you know? But so what? I ask you, whoever picks up on it? I might just as well have named it 'Caruso's' or something."

Mavis thought he was referring to Robinson Crusoe, because she couldn't remember ever hearing of Enrico Caruso; but then, as she might have pointed out in her defense—had she been indicted of felonious ignorance—Howie Bender probably could not have identified The Rubber Heels, Outboard Motor, Shebang, Utopia Limited, or any of the currently favorite rock groups that practically everybody else in the world knew about.

But there was no doubting the fact that the clever name Howie had chosen for his business was meaningless for the great majority of customers, who couldn't have cared less. Just like Mavis, who simply did her work and kept her mouth shut. However, this lack of communication in the name of his business really seemed to bother Howie a great deal, even though he was making money hand over fist, as Mavis liked to tell Gavin. "It's crazy. Sometimes he talks like the name is more important than making a humongous success out of his business!"

"Just so he signs your checks," Gavin told her laconically. Then added: "And has enough money in the bank to cover them."



"I know where you're coming from," Mavis answered, nodding. She'd picked up phrases that she associated with gutsy male competence, if not actual machismo, and liked to use them whenever possible. "You know damned well," Gavin said. "We need all the bucks we can get right now." He looked at their three-year-old girl, Timotha, and then at their infant boy, Broderick. Christ, you had to be practically a millionaire to be able to afford kids today! He couldn't remember his own parents struggling like this, and neither could Mavis. That is to say, she couldn't remember hers struggling like this, either. But of course, one's perspective changes, and Gavin and Mavis, when they were in, say, high school, may not have been aware of certain things about their parents.

Now, as he heard Mavis come screaming toward him in the shower, Gavin began to sense that something was not quite right with her. There was more than simple excitement in her screaming. Maybe she was coming unglued from winning so much money. Obviously, from the sounds she was making, she was hysterical and needed calming down. The prize that week was over two million dollars, and when he turned off the shower, Gavin meant to point out to her that there might be other winners with whom they would have to share the money. Also, the money would be spread over a number of years.

He opened the shower curtain, kind of smiling to help her calm down and get control of herself; but she violently swung the bathroom door open and yelled at him, "It's Dad, he's dead!" Then she started howling again, and Gavin stood there stunned, gazing at her out of a slowly dwindling perplexity.

"Your dad?" he finally asked, almost stupidly.

She nodded with her lips compressed, and he wondered how it was that trying to hold back tears always made you look as if you were kind of grinning. He nodded. "What happened?"

"Oh, Gav!" she cried and threw herself into his nakedness.

"I'm all wet," he told her.

"I know that. Why do you think I'd care about a thing like that at a time like this?"

"How did it happen?"

"Mom just called! Oh, God, she's still on the phone!"

Still holding her, Gavin felt the terrible news glance oddly off him, and realized how touching it was that she would instinctively head for him, leaving her mother stranded. He reached for a towel and started to dry himself off where he could reach around her clinging body. "Was it a heart attack or something?"

"Yes," she muttered, her voice muted by the thick hair on his chest.

"Just now?"

"Yes, he just fell over dead. Just now."

"How's your mother taking it?"

"She's hysterical. What do you think she'd be?"

"Don't you think you should get back to the phone?"

"And he's never been sick a day in his life!" Mavis gasped, pulling back and looking at Gavin as if she'd never really seen him before. Or as if he might fall over dead, too...right in front of her, dropping through her arms, as young and healthy as he was.

For an instant Gavin was going to correct her in what she'd said, for his father-in-law had been a

vociferous hypochondriac, which might not have been exactly the same thing as actually being sick, but was close enough. Nevertheless, Gavin prudently decided not to say anything along these lines.

"Now just get control of yourself," he told her, sounding calm and yet feeling his voice quiver a little. "And go back to talk to your mother on the phone. After all, she needs you." The thought of his mother-in-law waiting on the other end of the line for Mavis to get control of herself and stop crying struck him as oddly hilarious, somehow. Mavis had dropped her mother like a hot potato to come and cry on Gavin's nakedness; at least, that was the way it seemed to him at that instant. But, of course, he did what he could not to betray any such really disgustingly inappropriate thoughts. Not that Mavis was in any shape to notice much of anything in the way of nuance.

"Don't you think you should get back on the phone and say something?" he patiently asked again. "Didn't you say she was still on the phone?"

Mavis sniffed her tears back, nodded, and went back to the phone which was on the wall of the kitchen, by the entrance to their old-fashioned breakfast nook. But the instant she brought the receiver up to her face, she just started in crying again, wailing uncontrollably into the receiver, unable to say anything coherent, let alone comfort her mother. Well, her mother was probably doing the same thing, and wouldn't have been able to hear her, anyway.

Gavin finished drying himself off, put on his bathrobe, and went to the extension to tell Mavis' mother how sorry he was. He asked if there was anything they could do; he asked how they could

help. He could hardly hear her answer. Then he asked if she'd notified Mavis' brother and sisters yet, and she said no, Mavis was the first one she'd called. It had just happened. The emergency squad people were still there. Mavis' father was still in the front room. His body.

Her voice had something almost like hilarity in it, but Gavin knew that it was really hysteria. Just as Mavis had had this weird sort of gassy baby smile on her face when she told him, with her cheeks as wet from tears as he was all over from the shower...just as there was this powerful ambiguity in the way she looked, so there was a similar one in the way his mother-in-law sounded.

"I haven't called anyone else yet!" she gasped quickly, like someone trying to get an entire sentence out between spasms of laughter.

Gavin nodded. Of course she'd call Mavis first, because Mavis was the oldest. In her own wacky way, his mother-in-law had a very orderly mind. He pictured his father-in-law's body lying stretched out on the sofa, with the emergency squad people getting ready to put him on the wheeled stretcher. Gavin thought of what a load he'd be to lift. And once again he felt a sense of something odd and recklessly comic, which almost made him laugh out loud...so he repeated his question to his mother-in-law:

"Grace, is there anything we can do for you? How about calling?"

"Calling?"

God, she really was rattled! But then, his question seemed to sink in, and instinctively his mother-in-law answered Mavis, even though Gavin had asked the question. "Mavis, you might call the Everts' and the Magnusson's. Bert Magnusson



thought the sun rose and set on your father!" Hearing herself use the past tense, she gasped and started in weeping again, while Mavis made soothing sounds. Jesus, it really had been unexpected, Gavin admitted to himself. In spite of the old guy's chronic complaints.

Then it suddenly, surprisingly, came to Gavin that people who complain as much as his father-in-law begin to seem immortal, in a strange way, because the subject of death is never far away from their presence, and yet they seem to just keep on living and complaining forever. They don't actually live longer, but they live longer within the context of death, or something. Maybe it was like the little boy who cried wolf—after all those scares and alarms, you don't really expect the old guy to kick off while he's taking a nap on the sofa. Probably with some game show running on the TV and the sound turned down to a low murmur of music and muted yells of excitement. Not that Mavis' dad would have been able to hear such things, anyway. Not even if they were tuned up to normal volume. He remembered reading that deafness in older men can be a coronary symptom. Like just about everything else you could name.

Why was Gavin thinking this way? Because, after all, damn it, he'd really liked Mavis' dad; and the old guy seemed to like him, too, on those occasions when he wasn't preoccupied with things like sour stomach and constipation.

One time when he'd felt pretty good, he joked with Gavin, saying that in-laws were God's curse for getting married. Naturally, Gavin had laughed. But actually, for all his human faults, the old guy hadn't ever seemed like a curse to him; and the joke hadn't really seemed to have much point, although

he naturally didn't bring that up at the time. But maybe Gavin had somehow missed seeing some sinister defect in Mavis' dad that was right out there for everybody to see, if they'd just take the trouble to look. Maybe Gavin was too selfish to notice, too preoccupied with himself to be aware of the defects in his father-in-law's personality.

Maybe he really was self-centered. There had been that time three or four years ago when they'd had a serious discussion, and Mavis had told him he was too wrapped up in himself. Could that be true? But, when you came right down to it, wasn't everybody? Still, it was probably a matter of degree, like so many things. So maybe she was essentially right, and if Gavin hadn't been so wrapped up in himself, maybe he would have seen something despicable in his father-in-law.

The weirdness of this paradox was almost enough to make him chuckle, but he caught himself and felt a spasm of guilt and self-disgust as Grace went through the same old scenario again over the phone, obviously talking intimately, mother to daughter, to Mavis...as if Gavin hadn't been there to hear. The poor old soul was understandably hysterical, and now the two of them had reverted to some older, more primitive, female phase of their relationship as mother and daughter, and Grace had to get a lot of gab out of her system. Pouring it into her own blood, in a way. Gavin felt a certain decency in being aware of this possibility.

But then suddenly, once again, as if to ruin everything, he thought of Grace bottled up in the telephone while Mavis had come screaming into his wet nakedness, seeking dumb comfort from him.

But, good God, what was this? Why wasn't he

feeling the full shock? Why wasn't he missing his father-in-law? Why wasn't he more saddened? Why wasn't he even thinking more about his death, not to mention feeling a distinct sadness for the old guy, who wasn't—which is to say, hadn't been—all that bad, when you thought about it. Maybe such things would come in time; maybe it was too early for him to assimilate what had happened. Sure...but why was he so caught up in thinking about himself?

Once again, he found himself wondering if the old man really had died on the sofa. It seemed important for Gavin to know this. It was important for him to picture how things looked at this moment, and he almost interrupted Grace to ask if Mavis' dad had been taking one of his naps; but he decided that such a question would sound pretty indelicate this early in the game.

Grace was repeating herself for about the fourth time, adding a few details with each retelling but not getting his father-in-law's body any nearer to the sofa, so far as Gavin could tell. In a way, he hoped he had been there in his favorite spot; because dying while taking a nap wouldn't be the worst way to go. You couldn't deny that it would probably be a nice and easy exit. Maybe he should point this out to Grace and Mavis both, who were exchanging sobs once again; but again he decided not to, because it just seemed too early for that kind of comfort.

Suddenly, he realized that Grace had hung up, and Mavis was now approaching and gazing at him out of a bleary mindlessness. "Oh, God, Gav, he's dead!" she whispered. "My dad!"

Gavin, feeling old and sad and wise, clasped her in his arms again and said, yes, he understood,

and, God, he was shocked and sorry, too...but they were going to have to bear up.

Then, in spite of himself, he thought of his first reaction to her screaming. "Incidentally, where's that damned winning lottery ticket now?" a voice in his head asked.

But naturally he didn't say anything about this, either, although he couldn't help wondering if the phone call had interrupted Channel 8's drawing. He wondered if Mavis had checked all twenty sets of numbers...not as if they'd ever win anything in a gamble as mathematically loaded against winning as the lottery...still, if you'd bought twenty tickets, you'd be an idiot if you didn't check them against the winning numbers.

After all, you could never tell. And, thinking this, Gavin decided he'd call sometime tomorrow from Rosewood, where Mavis' parents lived. Had lived. At least, one of them.

He didn't bring up the subject of the twenty tickets to Mavis, so he was considerably surprised when they were in bed several hours later (they were going to get up early the next day and drive to her mom's house), and Mavis said, 'Incidentally, for what it's worth, we didn't win the lottery, either.'

He wondered exactly what she meant by "for what it's worth" and "either." But he didn't say anything. He merely patted her shoulder and then brought her body close so he could hug her and let her cry some more, if she had to.

But she was suddenly quiet. No doubt thinking. Or perhaps just remembering her dad, who hadn't really been a bad sort, when you thought about it, as Gavin kept reminding himself—half puzzled at why he couldn't feel anything at all,



hardly, beyond a certain responsibility to help Mavis get through what she had to get through in this whole sad, somehow goofy business.

At first, things at Rosewood were not quite as grim as he'd anticipated; but they were bad enough. Mavis' young sisters—one still in college, the other married to a skinny, adenoidal computer whiz in Memphis—had flown in with their husbands in tow; and her brother, a young political science instructor at SUNY in Buffalo, seemed to exert a somewhat stabilizing influence upon their mother.

For Grace seemed to be calm and deliberate now, after her initial, understandable hysterics. She was attentive as a hostess and mother; she was concerned that everybody had enough to eat from the table piled with cakes, freshly baked muffins, three casseroles, one loaded fruit dish, a whole roast turkey, and ham loaf that friends and neighbors had brought to the house.

Kirk, Mavis' brother, was drinking instead of eating. Glancing at him, now and then, Gavin noticed a bleak expression on his smeared, flushed face. He sat on the edge of his dead father's favorite naugahyde chair sipping from a bourbon on ice, mostly listening. Noticing how much weight he'd put on, Gavin realized with a sudden shock how much Kirk had gotten to look like his father. Maybe thirty or forty years from now he'd die taking a nap on a sofa somewhere, and his wife would phone their eldest daughter, who'd scream and come running to her husband, who was taking a shower...etc.

All of the attractive but heavy sisters, after much initial crying, were being ostentatiously, funereally brave; and by the second day, they had begun occa-

sionally to talk about everyday things, instead of dwelling with relentless futility on the sudden shocking death that had brought them all together for this sad reunion.

Eating a cheese-filled biscuit and sipping from a glass of sherry, Gavin pondered all these matters. He'd decided to leave the heavy booze to Kirk, if that's what he wanted. And leave the food to Mavis's sisters, who really were putting on weight and looking middle-aged. Even Karen, the one who was still in college. Obviously, they were all using food to help recover from the shock; it was something of a family tradition. Given the fact that their deceased father would have perfectly accepted it—if not entirely understood—there was a sort of piety in their behavior. So Gavin watched them become comfortably garrulous in their own home; and noticed that even Grace had gotten some color back in her face. He watched her as she sat listening to her wonderful daughters with a sort of numb and helpless avidity. Curious things, families...not to mention females. Yes, essentially females. Not to mention funeral gatherings.

Gavin sipped his sherry and thought about all that had happened and all that was happening. There was almost too much to take in. Maybe Kirk felt like this, too—he had slid down in the chair so that he was sitting on the small of his back, like a man tired and dazed from hours of toil, his glass of whiskey tilted ten degrees to his right, his hair mussed and his eyes sleepy. Was he drunk? Maybe a little bit. But limping far behind, in some dim male distance, whatever was going on with his mother. Not to mention Mavis and her sisters. It was somehow as if they, simply as women, had all practiced for this, somehow. Had been in training.

Perhaps, deep down, it really was a male/female thing; and Gavin and Kirk had all they could do just to hang on. Or maybe sit quietly and listen—or pretend to listen—from deep down inside themselves, patiently stupefied by the inscrutable, mystical female authority that was manifest at such climactic moments. Beyond doubt, it was best for a man to be wary, take in what he could, and wait for cues. The two of them, in this instance, each with his private thoughts. The old guy who was dead would have been just as numb and bewildered, if he'd been there. All of them out of their depth before female competence in the essential transitions of birth and death. But, Gavin asked himself as he stared at his glass of sherry, where in the hell was the birth now?

Suddenly, he was aware of a subtle shift in the tone of their voices. Things had turned suddenly dark again, following one of the periodic downswings. The three of them were talking in hushed voices about the funeral arrangements. Hoffer's Funeral Home. That's where the remains of Mavis' father were lying. Gavin had gone this morning with Mavis, and they were going to go back this evening, during visiting hours from five to seven. He hoped Kirk wouldn't be stumbling drunk by then. Not that he'd ever seen him this way. And not that the dead man would have objected too much, having been at least a moderate drinker most of his life. And maybe at one time more than that. Who could tell? His death had swallowed untold mysteries.

Suddenly, for some odd reason, Gavin remembered Mavis' scream, and remembered how his first thought had been she was crying for joy because she'd just learned they'd won the lottery.

Then, during all that grotesque choreography when poor Mavis had come stumbling toward him just out of the shower and hugged his wet naked body, how poor Grace had been bottled up in the telephone, maybe even holding back her tears because she knew they'd be wasted with nobody to hear.

The utter, inescapable hilarity of this scene struck him so forcibly that he couldn't hold it back, and, worse yet, knew he couldn't. It was going to be a losing battle. With a sort of horror, he felt himself sliding downhill, like a man slipping on sheer ice, until he actually chuckled out loud. The sound stopped the conversation in the room as if an electrical plug had been pulled. Gavin was aware that Kirk was looking over at him. Grace was looking over at him, too, from a different direction. Somebody abruptly inhaled. Mavis was frowning at him out of a distant perplexity.

What a grotesque sensation! There was this dense silence with all of these various intelligences—four out of five of them female—pointed at him, all of a sudden...as if it were somehow, finally, his turn. But he couldn't hold back. Sickeningly, he heard himself actually begin to laugh. And then Mavis was moving swiftly up to him in a rush of perfume, clasping him bewilderingly in her arms and whispering, "Oh, Gav, it's all right, Honey! You know it is!"

"Of course it is!" Grace cried passionately from a distance.

"Just go ahead and cry, Honey," Mavis whispered.

His sisters in law were murmuring softly, breathing through him like a breeze through the limbs of a catalpa tree.



"He loved you like a son," Grace announced judiciously from her even greater distance. Gavin heard the ice in Kirk's drink clatter like a frantic scrabbling of dumb claws against the glass as he raised it to his lips.

Gavin glimpsed him briefly as he sat there half-drunk and fascinated, watching his sister, Mavis comfort Gavin in her warm arms, while Gavin's laughter suddenly, abruptly, astonishingly, turned

to a convulsive hiccuping. Actually, by God, suddenly, goddammit, weeping, goddammit! And why shouldn't he have felt like a one-hundred percent idiot? And he'd be damned if he could have explained why he was doing something so totally stupid right there in front of everybody, when at the moment he couldn't even have pictured what his father-in-law looked like, already.

