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The Art of Losing

by Marion Umney

The art of losing isn't hard to master. Joseph was good at that. He wasn't a betting man really but when everyone else was shouting the odds it seemed unsociable not to join in.

He never won anything. He had a bit of a reputation among the lads. If Joe was betting on it, don't go near it, it's bound to lose. He took it all in good part. It was true and he didn't care. Like the rest of them he liked the excitement. That sense of possibility, just for a few moments, that he could win. He could imagine what it would be like, that moment of magic when the horse came in first, when he woke up to snow on Christmas day, when he got the magic ticket. Because he didn't expect to win, he was never really disappointed. He hadn't lost exactly, he had paid for his moment of excitement and was no worse off than he had been before, so that was OK.

Then it happened. That magic, unexpected moment. He didn't even think about the lottery. He just bought his ticket every Saturday and had his moment of excitement; the "What If" moment, when he checked the results. This time he had to check it several times before he could believe it. He got his wife to check it too.

"Not sure I can believe this Love. Just check these numbers for me will you."

She did.

"Bloody Hell Joe. We're rich."

She stared at him in disbelief, as a slow smile started to spread across her face.

Joe didn't know what to make of it. He spent the rest of the week in a daze. They didn't quite believe it down the Anchor either.

"What you. You've won two mill on the lottery – fuckin' 'ell. You'll be too good for the likes of us then."

"Course I won't. Nothin's changed. You're me mates."

"Drinks are on you then."

"Course – line 'em up Ted. We're celebrating."

Things had changed though and winning was much harder to master than losing. He didn't want to be always buying the drinks when he went in, he wanted to be just one of the lads, taking his turn like everyone else. But somehow it seemed mean not to offer, like they were all waiting just those few seconds longer than normal before someone said, "My shout", then giving him a look when he just said, "Thanks – mine's a pint". He was no longer "Joe the loser" the good bloke, they could tease about his persistent losing. He was "Joe the winner" and a bit of a mean bugger. Then Fred touched him for a bit of a loan "just to tide me over like." He was only too pleased to oblige a mate.

He couldn't help but feel slightly uncomfortable though as he got his cheque book out. It seemed a bit flash somehow, and he didn't like being flash.

"Thanks Mate. I owe you one."

Fred never paid it back. Joe didn't expect him to, but he was also the slowest of the lot to get up to pay his round, giving Joe what felt like a bit of a cold shoulder as he got up with a sigh and ambled listlessly to the bar.

Joe was miserable. His wife noticed, his kids noticed, everyone noticed.

They made suggestions.

"Go on holiday – you could do with a break, and you can well afford it."

"Is it work? You could give up tomorrow you know you lucky bastard."

It was his youngest who finally clocked it.

“You’re lonely aren’t you Dad. This money’s been more of a curse than a blessing. Seems like you’ve lost yourself.”

That’s when it came to him. He had lost himself. He wasn’t Joe the winner he was Joe the loser and that’s what he’d lost.

The solution was easy. A day at Newmarket solved it all, although the bookies’ couldn’t believe their luck.

Best day he’s had in years. Blew the lot on the 6 races and lost every darn one of them. Six shots of adrenaline willing his horse to lose and the delight when it did!