

Excerpt – *The Phoenix Lottery*

Enemies of Edgar Beamish are delighted with his funeral. It's a fiasco. Spectators are divided on the most compelling image. For some, it's the sight of communion trays flying through the air, dropping wafers like manna on the assembled mourners. For others, it's the widow carried screaming from the church in her underwear. Or the priest with the black eye. Or the son collapsing on the altar, a hypodermic stuck in his backside. But whichever image spectators dine out on, all agree it's hard to ignore the star turn of the corpse.

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Having failed to keep his mother sober for the visitation, Junior is determined she be presentable for the funeral. He takes no chances. Kitty's bedroom door is kept ajar, with servants posted in rotation through the night. Kitty is not a happy camper. Fortunately, her tirades the following morning are checked by a migraine of some consequence.

Indeed, Kitty is a study in pathos. If she so much as looks sideways, her brain throbs. It is too painful even to sob. In such dire straits, she sits immobile or walks, when absolutely necessary, slowly, carefully, as if competing for Posture Queen.

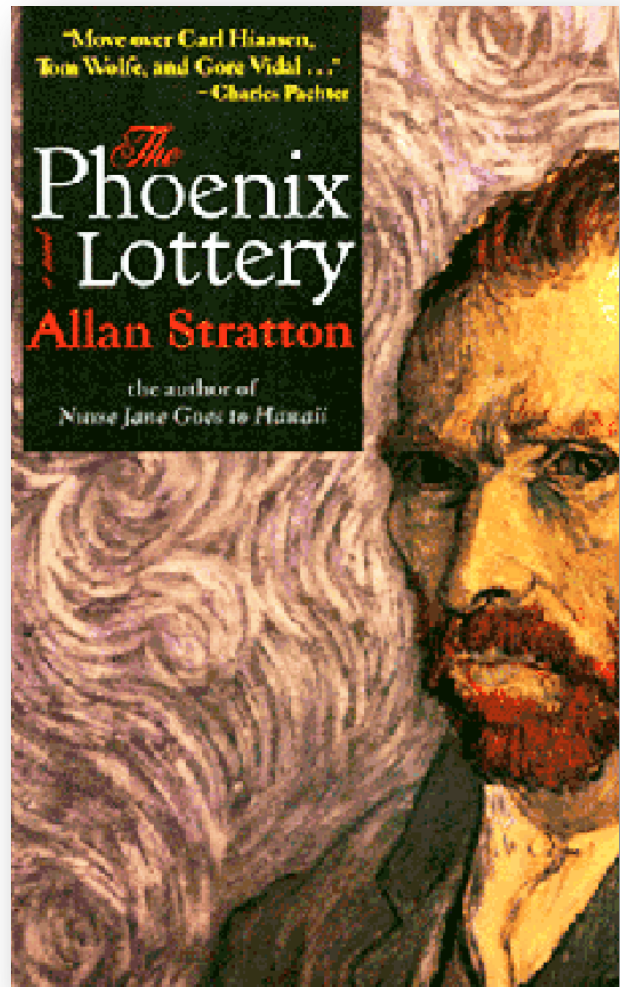
Kitty's migraine is not helped by the arrival of her mother, deposited from Caledon in her gardening outfit. "She insisted," the nurse apologizes. Mrs. Danderville hasn't been the same since Henry's death. In fact, in recent years she has turned into someone else altogether.

It is for Kitty to dress her for the funeral.

An eternity of buttons, zippers and straps later, Kitty turns her mother to face the full-length mirror in the master bedroom. Seeing their reflections, Mrs. Danderville becomes positively shy.

"What lovely dresses everyone has on."

"Yes, mother. Lovely black dresses."



“Are they going to a party?”

“No, mother. We are going to a funeral.”

“That’s nice. Anyone we know?”

“Edgar.”

“Edgar? We don’t know any Edgar.”

“Yes we do, mother. Edgar. My husband Edgar. The one you can’t stand.”

“Oh, but I can’t stand Edgar.”

“Then you’ll enjoy his funeral.”

“Will he be there?”

“God willing.”

“What lovely dresses everyone has on.”

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Junior has taken pity on his mother and allowed her a Demurral to help her through the service. It’s a move he will regret. Kitty may have been virtually immobile, but she’s been plotting revenge.

She begs Junior to take her to St. Paul’s an hour-and-a-half in advance: she needs more time with her beloved. A quick glance at the open coffin on the chancel to make sure he’s well and truly dead, and she’s overcome, retreating to the study commandeered for the occasion by the Reverend Canon Archie B..

“Please, Archie,” the widow Beamish daubs her eyes, “Might I have a private moment with my son?”

Belltower, labouring on his eulogy -- specifically, a tasteful allusion to St. Jude’s west wing renovation, so faithfully supported by the dear departed -- readily acquiesces.

Kitty turns to face her quarry. “Junior, my pet, you have done so much for me these past few days, and I do appreciate it. Really. But, between you and me, I am just a tiny bit thirsty, and I was wondering if you might arrange a wee scotch and soda?”

“You shouldn’t drink.”

“I didn’t ask for an opinion,” Kitty purrs sweetly. “I asked for a drink.”

“No.”

Kitty sighs. Clearly the lad is simple. “Junior,” she explains patiently, “I am having a drink, and you are fetching it for me. Otherwise, when everyone is seated, the Premier, the Archbishop, captains of industry and the press, I will march to the front of the church, whip out the old bugger’s pecker and give him a goodbye kiss that will curl his toes til Doomsday.”

Junior blanches.

“The scotch is in the car under the spare tire. And I better not taste the soda.”

Kitty gratefully accepts her tumbler of ‘tea’ and retreats to the study’s restroom, the better to compose herself. By the time the dignitaries begin arriving, Kitty is so composed she resembles a still life. A Zen philosopher in shades, she floats through the sea of mourners, an oasis of calm, murmuring, “Qué sera sera.” The last syllable is inaudible, but one gets the point.

Premier Divot holds her hand. “He was a loyal Tory and a great friend. I’m so sorry.”

“Qué sera se....”

The Premier extends his arm. Kitty melts into it and lets him waft her up the aisle. She is Grace Kelly. She is Audrey Hepburn. She is Blanche du Bois died and gone to Heaven. She waves in gracious slow motion to all those strange people she thinks she ought to recognize, “Qué sera se....”, and blows a kiss in the general direction of Rudyard Gardenia.

Junior follows, escorting his Granny Danderville. “They say you’re dead!” she hisses at him. He deposits his grandmother in the front row beside the Premier and his mother and goes to bid his father a final goodbye.

The Premier has never met a widow he didn’t like. And he likes Kitty more than most. Indeed, he’s just barely managed to get them to the pew before anyone can notice how the tantalizing musk of her perfume has aroused his tender instincts. He puts a compassionate arm around her and whispers gently in her ear, “I must say you’re holding up very well.”

“Well,” she purrs confidentially, “It’s easy when the corpse is a shit. That bastard shtupped every skirt he could catch, including the pallbearers’ wives. He even shtupped your mistress.”

The Premier shrivels.

Meanwhile, at the coffin, Junior is overcome with a wave of emotion. When he looks at his father’s face, he sees a man so much more vulnerable than he remembers. How could he have turned on him as he did?

“Dad, wherever you are, I have something for you. A peace offering, if that’s possible. I need to be with you. In some way. I want you to have this.” Junior takes a photograph from his pocket.

In the picture, he’s four, sitting with his Dad in the semi-enclosed rooftop bar of the duPont mansion in Varadero. They’re sharing a Coke float through two straws, a panorama of Caribbean sky behind them. It’s December of 1958. Within the month, their lives will be turned upside down, but this photograph holds a moment of pure, irreplaceable joy.

Junior remembers that day: the ride in the new de Soto, head out the window, salt breeze in his hair; the hot dog at the beach front grill he’ll learn was once home to Al Capone; the shallows at Playa Corales where he saw his first boxfish; the piggyback on his Dad’s back up the narrow winding stairs to the bar for that Coke float.

Carefully, Junior places the photograph in the inside pocket of his father’s suit jacket. A memory to travel with his father to the land of the dead. For a moment, Junior sees himself as an ancient Egyptian, a bereaved prince burying a talisman with his Pharaoh father. “There are so many things I wanted to say to you.” He pauses, then kisses his father gently on the forehead. “Goodbye.”

“Not so fast, you little shit.”

Junior blinks. The corpse is staring at him.

“Dad?”

“Keep your voice down. Do you want people to think you’re crazy?”

Junior is about to take a step back. The corpse grabs his hand. “I said not so fast. I’m not through with you yet.”

Bewildered, Junior looks out at the congregation. His mother is nodding off. Mrs. Danderville is whispering in the Premier’s ear. (“When does the play begin?”) The Reverend Canon Belltower is studying the eulogy. The organist is playing Mozart’s “Requiem”, while members of the choir keep silent time with their heads or fan themselves with the Order of Service. The Archbishop, sundry incumbents, deacons, cabinet ministers and reporters, variously clear their throats or check their watches. In the back row, Miss Pristable bites her lip. Certainly none of them seem to notice anything unusual.

“Pay attention.” The corpse squeezes his hand. Hard. “So many things you wanted to say to me. Bullshit. You don’t get off that easy, sonny.”

“Let go of me.”

“It’s that night in Varadero, isn’t it? You’ve hated me ever since.”

“I didn’t,” Junior whispers hoarsely.

“Age ten you went around asking people to adopt you. Age eighteen, you set up a picket on the front lawn.”

“Dad, you’re hurting me.”

“Cry me a river. You picketed your own goddam parents!”

“You hired scab labour.”

“Your mother comes home from a facial and there you are on the front verandah screaming into a megaphone, ‘MY DAD IS A NAZI SCUM BAG!’ I’ll always remember that news clip of your poor mother, scrambling through the bushes like a hunted animal.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re such a piss-ass weasel.” The corpse lets go its grip. Junior drops to his knees, massaging his knuckles.

“I’M SORRY! I’M SORRY!” he sobs.

A hush falls over the congregation. The Reverend Canon Belltower glides over and puts his arm around Junior’s shoulder. “It’s all right.” With a lifetime of professional compassion at his fingertips, the Canon raises Junior to his feet. An audible sigh from the congregation. Belltower acknowledges their relief with an infinitely caring nod of the head. He gives Junior’s shoulder a fatherly squeeze and says gently, “There now. I’m afraid it’s time.”

“Time for what?”

Unable to find a means to delicately state the obvious, Belltower smiles awkwardly and repeats, “Time. It’s... time. You know... time.”

But Junior appears to remain perplexed. Belltower casts tact to the wind. “It’s time to close the lid.”

“But my father’s not dead,” Junior whispers, a hint of desperation in his voice.

“Of course not,” Canon Belltower agrees. “He’s alive in the arms of Jesus.”

“I said, my father’s alive! He talked to me just now!”

The congregation leans forward. Canon Belltower gives a vague priestly wave to calm the congregants, specifically the Archbishop, who sees the fourth estate furtively pulling out their note pads. “It’s all right, everyone. It’s all right.”

“It’s not all right! You’re trying to bury my father!”

“We must be brave,” says Canon Belltower.

“Get away from me.”

“Let go and let God.”

“Let go yourself.” With that, Junior hauls off and punches The Reverend Canon Archibald Belltower B.A., M.Div., Th.M., Th.D., D.D. smack on the nose. Belltower executes a perfect back flip off the chancel steps.

All hell beaks loose.

Three deacons rise to subdue Junior, but he runs behind the coffin, grabs a large crucifix and holds it like a baseball bat. The deacons cower.

“MY FATHER’S ALIVE!”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE’S ALIVE?” Kitty screams, snapping awake bolt upright. “HOW DARE HE NOT BE DEAD!” She lurches to her feet. The Premier grabs her shoulders to restrain her, but Kitty’s on a mission. “IF THAT SONOVABITCH ISN’T DEAD, I’LL KILL HIM MYSELF!”

Kitty charges forward. There’s a huge rip and the Premier finds himself holding the top half of the widow’s dress.

“Bravo!” squeals Mrs. Danderville, clapping her hands with glee.

“What lovely dresses!”

Kitty swings her purse to break free. It hits the Premier on the mouth, the catch snaps open, and a mickey of scotch smashes to the floor, spraying shards of glass and booze.

Rip. Kitty is free.

Seeing Junior distracted, the deacons go on the attack. But he recovers and swings wildly, hitting a home run with the communion trays. In the ensuing melee, B.E.I. Vice-President of Operations Frank Kendal makes his move. A former high school defensive linebacker, he dives for Junior’s knees.

It’s a clean tackle. Junior buckles backwards against the coffin. It topples over, sending the body flying. The corpse loses its toupee as it bounces off the top chancel step. It loses its glasses as it

ricochets off the second. It rolls another ten feet, then comes to an abrupt stop as its head whacks the front pew. The jaw cracks open. The dentures fly out.

“DIE, DAMMIT, DIE,” the widow screams in her underwear, kicking the corpse in fury.

“Bravo!” squeals Mrs. Danderville.

Junior struggles gamely to his feet, but Dr. Billings has leapt from his pew and into position. He jabs Junior in the backside with a hypodermic of Chlorpromazine. The last thing Junior sees before collapsing on the altar is his father’s corpse staring at him with a bug-eyed, gummy grin, while its teeth roll merrily down the centre aisle toward the waiting hearse.