

FOUR

“N-40.”

“Boo!!!!!!!!!!” the crowd yelled. Drew, of course, was perplexed. Why was everyone booing at the last called number?

“Get the hell out of here, ya freak!” yelled some elderly woman from the second table. Wait, elderly isn’t the right word for her, Drew decided. She might have been the only person in the hall who had a walker for her lucky troll.

“What do you want from me, Ethel!” Drew was not happy. His day at work was hectic enough. Now he was being ambushed by the most unruly group of citizens in the world: losing bingo players. “I call the numbers, you daub your paper. It’s that easy. I have the hard job. I have to pull the Ping-Pong balls out and call the numbers. They make it look easy on the lottery show, but damn, it’s not easy at all!”

This caused more ire from the crowd. The next ball was already positioned to be called, yet the audience was hostile and rowdy. Drew was even more confused.

“Drew, we are playing Big X,” Ethel said. “There are no ‘N’ numbers. Just throw that number out for crying out loud. Don’t read numbers we can’t use!!!”

Of course, the Big X doesn’t include “N” numbers, because the free space is the center of the X. The crowd looked relieved, as did Drew. He now had to wait five minutes for Ethel to get situated again. It’s kinda funny, Drew thought, as he remembered when Ethel McMahan was a little more civil, back in the good ol’ days, when she was under 100. Even the troll gave Drew a dirty look.

Drew had more important things on his mind than bingo. Granted, he still enjoyed calling games two nights a week at St. Pius, where Drew and Jessica, his wife, were members. The definition of a church member these days, it

seemed, was that you donated money to its ongoing projects. So considering Drew almost always bought some nachos during his bingo nights, he counted that as contributing. So maybe Jessica didn't count after all, even though they were forced to have their picture taken for the church directory.

"OK, OK ... on with the game," Drew said. "Let's get it on!"

The audience roared in pleasure. Bingomania was on again.

Drew called one final number for the Big X — G-49 — and Jimmy Dickson picked up the victory. By Drew's calculations, Jimmy had bingoed four of the last six weeks, which would put him among the league leaders in victories. But alas, there was no league, and no leaderboard, so Jimmy settled for his \$150, \$10 of which went to Dale Washington's granddaughter, Becky. She was the Bingo Helper who yelled out Jimmy's winning numbers to Drew to verify the win. This also allowed Jimmy to work his other game a little more, since he flirted with Becky and all the helpers. The main problem was that Jimmy was 71, and Becky was 17. Jimmy swore up and down to Becky and the others that his age was transposed on his driver's license, but they always wondered how come he never mentioned it two years ago.

Another game of straight bingo for the approximately 250 in attendance — Martha Singleton, a.k.a, Big Martha Triplebutt, took the win in six numbers — was followed by a short intermission. Drew had Becky bring him some nachos and a Dr Pepper, and before she made it back, he was furiously writing down notes on a piece of scratch paper. Drew jotted down a few items about The Profiler before he forgot them, but roars from the crowd overwhelmed his concentration.

"Get your lazy ass on with the calling, bee-yatch!" Ethel said.

Ethel gets ugly sometimes, especially in the drought she is in. The lady hadn't won at St. Pius in four years. For one of the top 10 earnings winners in four straight decades, that wasn't acceptable. Some people thought she was getting too old to play. It's hard to justify what is too old to play bingo, though. At 104, she definitely wasn't the youngest in the building.

Becky started to walk away from the caller's table when Drew motioned for her.

"If we do more testing on The Profiler, we could use your help," Drew said. "You could be one of the first people on the system!"

“Awesome!” Becky said.

The comment seemed to brighten Becky’s day, more so than Jimmy trying to rub her shoulders. The raunchy men, combined with the thick layer of smoke in the room, made for an unappetizing atmosphere for most of the Helpers. But it was kinda fun, especially when the the debate between Bob Barker’s best years, black hair or white hair, resonated through the hall. The discussion had grown to a point that two years ago, the room was actually divided into Blacks and Whites, based on Barker’s hair color. With the help of Drew, the group finally decided he was good both ways, but the difference was since his hair turned white, he made a stronger effort to control the pet population.

Drew was ready for the second half of this Wednesday night’s escapade. But at the same time, he needed to get his shit together for Friday. Drew spent most of his afternoon determining the various fields to be used for The Profiler.

Initially, Kevin was going to work on the project with Drew, but he opted to go visit his sister. From the aura surrounding Kevin the early part of the afternoon, he expected things to go well with one of his sister’s friends. After Kevin left, Sarina filled Drew in a bit with Kevin’s desire to date one of her friends. Oh to be young again, Drew thought. Not that he was old. At 31, Drew was the oldest Developer. He had lived in Malorett longer than any of the others in the group. After graduating from Georgia Tech, he did some grad school work at Moxee Tech and eventually taught classes for a couple years there. That’s how he met Matt, and from there, the two pretty much started The Developers. The group was just an idea on the back burner, until four years ago, when Matt told Drew he had enough clients to do development for a living. Drew joined Matt shortly thereafter, still teaching at the university. Finally, the work was overwhelming enough that Drew cut back to part time, then left completely about two years ago. It was definitely going to be good to see the .comU project come to fruition.

Game 17, dubbed the “Double Floating Postage Stamp,” was Drew’s favorite. All a contestant has to do is cover two squares of four numbers on the board. There was heated debate once as to whether or not your boxes could overlap, and as of now, the rule was that the boxes could, indeed, overlap.

Strangely enough, this debate paled in comparison to the Bob Barker debate, and thankfully, unlike that one, no one was injured.

As Drew called the game and munched on his nachos, he remembered to call Jessica quickly and let her know he wouldn't be eating dinner at home. Drew and Jessica had been married for eight years. Jessica taught at Moxee Tech, as she had since they moved there, in the math department. She was happy with her job, but she wasn't extremely pleased when Drew decided to leave the school for The Developers. Drew worked many long hours the first year or so, and Jessica usually saw him only on weekends. But lately, they had become closer, with Jessica being relegated to just part time during this year, and Drew being home more often. They decided it would be time to start a family when things were basically settled, hopefully in the next year or so.

Chet Marshall took the big prize in coverall. The extra jackpot, which is given out only if a player bingos in fewer than 50 numbers, was up to \$650. After 44 numbers, Big Martha was only two away, but Chet had three of the final five numbers to win it outright. Big Martha was crushed, but not nearly as crushed as her seat cushion, when the final number she needed appeared on the monitor just after Chet yelled "bingo." At least Martha won one game, which is better than most, and she would be able to get double cheese on pizzas for at least two weeks.

Drew was tired when he arrived at St. Pius, but by the time Game 20, the final game, rolled around, he was thoroughly exhausted. Between numbers, Drew caught a message on his scrap paper he hadn't noticed. It just said "Need help, call me later, Katy." This was extremely bizarre, Drew thought. When did Katy write this on his paper?

Katy didn't appear to be in the best mood by the end of the work day. She had to answer a couple of voice mails, mainly dealing with Friday's meeting. The news leaked to the press — of course, Kevin was the leak, done with plenty of tact. Kevin would call the newspaper and the local TV and radio stations and give them great insider information all the time. And when they would ask his name, he would just say "Deep Throat." Maybe the media companies would think that their Deep Throat did have some amazing information, but unfortunately, all he had turned up so far was a small apart-

ment fire (which he started), a person streaking down Main Street (Sarina, of course) and any of their big meetings. Kevin sometimes talked about wanting to meet the real Deep Throat, and possibly having him call the places in Malorett, just to prove he did have some connections. He sent Pat Buchanan, who both Kevin and Drew think was the original, an email once, but unfortunately, there was no response.

Katy told all media outlets that the .comU meeting scheduled for Friday was closed to the public, but that a press release would be sent just after the meeting. With every call, and every request for more information and/or interview, Katy obliged to as much as she could. Drew and Sarina overheard some of her conversations, wondering if she was spreading herself too thin. Then they remembered, this is what Katy lives for anyway. She can handle it.

Just before 5, Matt returned to the office with a man that Drew, Katy and Sarina had never met. Matt and the gentleman seemed to be in somewhat of a rush.

“Katy ... Katy ... are you here?” Matt said, as he and the man looked into the WAB. Katy just happened to be in the corner, looking through files, for a contact from the newspaper. The person from the newspaper had said his name on the phone minutes before, but either he didn’t speak clearly, or he was eating a sub sandwich while trying to imitate Charles Bronson.

“Yeah, I’m here, Matt. What’s going on?”

“I need those papers, Katy. The ones we were talking about earlier.”

“How much earlier?”

“You know. THE papers. The .comU papers.”

“Which papers? Contracts? Site specifications? Privacy and legal documents?”

Matt was scrambling around on Katy’s desk as she spoke. Katy noticed the paper rustling and spun around.

“Matt! What papers?”

He didn’t answer for 20 seconds, then held up five sheets that had been connected by a paper clip.

“Never mind. Here they are. Let’s get out of here, Doug. Sorry it took so long.”

Doug, the previously unnamed man, shrugged his shoulders and walked out just behind Matt. Katy, Drew and Sarina all just looked at each other, stunned.

“What just happened?” Sarina said.

“Who was that guy?” Katy asked, looking specifically at Drew.

“I’ve never seen that guy in my life,” said Drew.

Just as Drew finished his sentence, Matt poked his head in the doorway once more.

“Let’s get this place looking a little better,” Matt said. “We are going to have visitors Friday, and we can’t have papers all over the place.”

Katy was already irritated that Matt flipped through her papers. Now he was telling her to pick them back up?

“What the hell?” Katy said. “We aren’t going to dirty the place up for company. We have to get this other stuff finalized. Sarina is reading over and editing policies. Drew is finishing the database modifications. I’m ...”

Matt didn’t let her finish.

“You,” said Matt, pointing at Katy and then at her desk, “will clean up the mess at your desk. Immediately. There’s no need to discuss this further.”

Matt left, and Katy turned toward her desk. Drew and Sarina looked at each other, not knowing if they had missed something. Katy and Matt seemed to be on good terms personally earlier, although that never seemed to last long. Business-wise, though, things were always conducted appropriately.

“Are you OK?” Sarina asked Katy.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” Katy began stacking her papers into two piles in an orderly fashion. “That client must be someone important.”

“If so then why do we still not know him?” Drew said.

Drew never found an answer to his question. Not that the answer would appear at bingo, but maybe Katy had found it. Maybe that’s why she wrote the note on the paper.

Finally a winner, Drew thought. Sid Mench grabbed Game 20 with an eight-number bingo, a simple small diamond. Sid was best friends with Jimmy Dickson, so they were going to celebrate their double win, perhaps with a steak dinner at Ponderosa. Sid gave Becky a tip, and as Drew was packing up his things, she came over to the caller table.

“Guess what, Drew?” Becky said. “Sid and Jimmy want to take all three of us helpers out to eat. Do you want to come with us?”

“Sorry Becky, I gotta run,” Drew said. “I need to finish up some stuff from work, plus Jessica is expecting me home soon. Have fun though!”

Becky grimaced, but she waved, spun around and headed back over to where Sid and Jimmy were sitting. Drew normally stayed around and chatted with the bingo patrons, but he needed to get out of there and call Katy. Drew checked his watch — it was almost 10. Surely that’s not too late, especially with the type of note in his pocket. He made it to his car and dialed Katy’s number on his cellphone. After four rings, her answering machine picked up.

“Hi, this is Katy. I’m not in right now. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you soon. Unless, of course you are Michael. If you are Michael, or one of Michael’s friends, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER CALL THIS NUMBER AGAIN!!!! BEEP!”

Drew was unsure if he should leave a message or pray that Michael never called her again. He checked the scribbled note, and took the first option.

“Katy! It’s Drew. Sorry I’m calling so late ... “

He was interrupted by Katy picking up.

“Drew! It’s me! Thank God you called. Things have been crazy both in and out of the office lately. Sorry about the message. I just made it a few hours ago.”

“Oh? He’s back again?”

“Who the hell knows. There was a message on my answering machine when I got home tonight. He called again an hour later. Doesn’t he get it? I put up with his shit long enough when we were dating and when we were married! I don’t have to deal with that anymore!”

Drew seriously doubted he had time for another Katy tirade regarding Michael. They had been together about three years, one and a half married, and then they separated for one year. The divorce was final about five months ago, but every month, he called Katy with some ridiculous request. Drew was waiting at a stoplight, but he had approximately five minutes until he made it home. He was beat, so he needed to figure some way out of this mess. Maybe he could tell Katy he had to go to the bathroom, or possibly he was

just in a 27-car pileup. No, at 10 p.m. in Malorett, there probably weren't 27 cars even in operation. The bathroom thing was the best he could do in such short notice.

"Katy, I'd love to talk, but I have to go REALLY bad."

"Go? I thought you were driving someplace now?"

"Yeah, I'm almost there. I have to go REALLY bad."

"Aren't you going there now?"

"No go! As in go to the bathroom!"

"Dude, you used that excuse last time I told you a story about Michael."

"Did you just call me dude?"

"Drew, I didn't call you about Michael. I called you to talk to you about what happened at the WAB today."

Relieved, Drew closed his eyes for a second, which is a pretty dumb thing to do on a two-lane highway. A semi narrowly avoided Drew's vehicle as it crossed over the centerline for a fraction of a second.

"I thought you were OK with everything, Katy," Drew said. "That Matt was just in a bad mood or trying to get stuff done or something?"

"That was the easiest thing to say at the time. But that's not the case. He's thinking about me again, Drew. I can just tell it. I can tell it every time."

"Well of course he's thinking about you, Katy. He kinda has to. I mean, you are an integral part of .comU."

"No, he's thinking about me in other ways."

There's only one thing worse than hearing Katy talk about Michael, and that's hearing about Matt, Drew thought. Well there are a couple of worse things ... like the time Ethel and Big Martha decided to mud wrestle to raise money for St. Pius. As Drew was rambling to himself in his head, he realized he was discussing something with Katy, although he couldn't remember what it was. So he used a standard question to refresh his memory.

"How do you know?" Drew said.

"I just told you!" Katy said. "I can tell!"

"You can tell what?"

"That he's thinking about me!"

"Who is?"

"Matt! Have you been listening to me?"

Oh yeah, Matt and Katy. Now he remembered.

“Of course I have, Katy. I just wanted to make sure. So he said something today when he was talking about cleaning the place? What was it?”

“Well ... nothing just then. But the whole day, the way he was looking at me, the way he glanced at me, pretending he wasn't. The way he said different things to me, in the meeting and afterward. The way he looked through my papers. He doesn't do that to everyone.”

“But remember Katy, he had a client with him! He was in a hurry. I don't think it was anymore than that.”

“How would you know, Drew? Have you ever dated him?”

Drew thought for a minute just to make sure he was absolutely positive of the question.

“Um, no Katy, I haven't. But that shouldn't matter. I don't think he's thinking about you like that. He has too much else on his mind.”

The garage door opened at Drew's house. He had made it home. Katy was going nowhere with this, plus they all had to be there by somewhat early in the morning.

“I don't think so, Drew,” Katy said. “He wanted to know what I was doing for lunch Thursday because he wanted to go somewhere and get a fish sandwich.”

Drew hit his head with his right hand. This was more serious than he thought. The fish sandwich was a dead giveaway.

“Katy, I made it home,” Drew said. “Let me call you right back after I tell Jessica the situation. We have to be to work early, but we have to take care of this tonight.”

