Milton Rosenow, in whose life irony is an infrequent and unwelcome visitor, is reading of the strange little man’s death while on the very same bus on which he met him the day before. It might even be the very same seat. That Milton Rosenow is even on a bus is ironic in itself, because he started riding the 903 to work the day after buying the car of his dreams. Under no circumstances, he had explained to his wife Edna, would he expose a cherry red Lexus LS 2005 to the automotive incompetence that passed for “driving” each weekday on Wisconsin Avenue. Riding the bus would be fun, he told her. Give him a chance to read the paper for a change.

At the time Edna was wrapping a Baccarat crystal vase as a gift for a niece who was to be married in Bethesda the coming weekend. “I give it three days,” she said. “Three days traveling with the masses and you’ll be willing to drive your new Lexus through a minefield in Afghanistan.”

“Oh, yes? Well, I’ll show you,” Milton very nearly said to her.

Milton is reading about the death on his fourth day on the bus, which is important because whatever happens now, Edna’s prediction will be at least be slightly-less-than-100% accurate. The article is in the Metro section under the continuing saga of how big the pot for the Virginia State Lottery had become. *Man Found Dead On K St.* Is it really the man from yesterday? The picture certainly looks like him.

“You wanna move your bag, there, Hon?”

Milton looks up from his paper. A bulbous woman with a red kerchief tied around her mostly-gray hair is staring at him rather severely. He quickly moves his leather attaché case from the seat next to him onto what he fears will be the very sticky
floor of the bus. By the time she finishes tucking herself into the seat Milton has read that the man was discovered at about 1:30 this morning by a young couple passing by on K St. The article goes on to say that he had apparently been —

_Tap, Tap, Tap._ Milton starts violently, shaking the glasses askew on his nose! A gnarled finger has appeared from nowhere and is tapping sharply at the top of his newspaper. This shocking and unprecedented assault on his reading matter is being perpetrated by the large woman who is jabbing a finger at the Metro headline: _Lotto Pot at 224 Million_!

“Got your tickets?” In his astonishment, all Milton can do is gape at her. “Did ya get your Lotto tickets?” she repeats. “Biggest pot in history, see?” She helpfully taps on his paper again.

For the first time Milton truly notices the woman. Her face is dotted with liver spots and the gray hair under the red kerchief is thin enough to see the pink of her scalp. She wears a tatty blue sweater and carries a cavernous bag from which a wooden handle protrudes. It appears to be the handle of a brush. Not a hair brush but some kind of scrubbing brush. Though she might easily be more than seventy years old, it seems to Milton that she is on her way to work, probably to clean someone’s home or office.

“Ya got a ticket, don’t you?” Apparently, she is actually expecting Milton to answer this question.

“Ah … yes … I mean, no.” Milton is doubly flustered – that question is more or less how yesterday’s conversation with the (now) dead man started.
Then, as now, Milton was reading the Metro section and, then, as now, it mentioned the Lottery. Milton did not register that the man had even sat down until the latter spoke, in a strong cheery voice.

“Well,” he announced, “I have just succumbed to the collective madness and bought myself a lotto ticket.” He spoke with an accent, not quite British -- Canadian, perhaps? In response, Milton barely cast him a sideways glance, but the man, undaunted, pressed on amiably. “How about you? Are you in line for two-hundred million?”

Milton did not look up from the story he was reading on airport security at Regan National Airport. “I don’t usually go in for that sort of thing,” he mumbled. This statement, while certainly true, was not quite accurate as a reply to the question he was asked.

“Oh, me neither, never, never. But my wife absolutely hounded me. Simply would not let up. The man laughed. He affected a voice like the Wicked Witch of the West. “It’s two hundred million dollars -- you buy a Ticket, that’s an order!”

Had he been inclined, Milton could have easily commiserated with having bought a Lotto ticket solely at the behest of a forceful wife. He didn’t answer, but it was enough to make him look up from the paper and consider the man. He appeared to be about Milton’s age, mid-to-late fifties, but much smaller, his feet barely touched the floor of the bus. On his lap sat an overstuffed leather case whose handle nearly reached his chin. The man wore baggy corduroy trousers and a tweed jacket over a sweater-vest and tie. All of these items were in various shades of the same color – brown – but in no other sense could they be said to match.
“So I bought a ticket, as instructed,” the man said, “now she’s more angry at me than ever!” Milton smiled in a way meant to be polite but not encouraging, and returned to perusing the Metro Section.

The old woman withdraws her finger from Milton’s paper but continues to stare at him, shaking her head. “Gave my stupid son a dollar, ‘Get me a ticket,’ I says. Told him I’d split it with him if I was to win.”

“Ah,” Milton says without looking at her. He goes back to the article which reports that the little man was stabbed ten or twelve times and left lying on the sidewalk late last night, most likely between 11:00 PM and midnight. A passerby found him unconscious at half past 1:00. He was taken to George Washington University Medical Center where he was pronounced dead an hour after arrival. Milton has never known anyone who was murdered before. He imagines how he will tell all this to Edna.

Yesterday, Milton was no more interested in lottery discussions between the little man and his harpy wife than he now is about the old woman’s relationship with her reputedly-stupid son. He merely grunted and resumed consideration of how the average air traveler waits in a security line for 37 minutes before proceeding through to the terminal gates. But as he read this, something the man had said slowly seeped into his cognizance, it brought an image of Edna into his mind. After a minute he could no longer contain his curiosity.

“Why was she mad after you bought the ticket?”

The small man seemed pleased to have been asked this question. “Well, you know how this Lotto thing works, right? You choose six numbers and if you exactly
match the number drawn you get the jackpot; if five of your six digits match, you get less; if 4 match less still, and so on.”

“I see,” Milton said, as if he did not already know this.

“Well, I dutifully picked my six numbers,” the man told him. He reached into his left breast pocket of his tweed jacket to extract a billfold. Smiling, he withdrew the ticket and held it up to show to Milton. “Here they are.”

Milton frowned. He leaned forward and peered over the rim of his glasses at the little rectangle of blue and red cardboard. He looked at the ticket, squinted, and looked at it again. “You chose that number?”

“I did,” he said, “And now my wife says I’m mocking her, that I deliberately picked a losing number.”

“I can see why,” Milton said, “I’ve never heard of anyone winning a lottery with number like that.” This topic wasn’t so interesting after all and Milton turned back to the Metro section.

“Of course you haven’t, few people would choose such a number. But people don’t seem to realize we have no more power to select a losing number than we do a winning number.”

Milton looked sideways at the man and raised one eyebrow. In spite of himself, he had to ask, “What do you mean?”

“If the drawing is truly random, any number I choose – even this one,” he waved the ticket, “has precisely the same probability of winning as any other number. Our human intuition tells us that we increase the odds by picking, oh, you know, a number
based on our wife’s birthday, or the license number of our first car. This is complete nonsense, you realize.”

On reflection Milton recognized, of course, that the man was right. As he recalls this he is aware of the old women beside him prattling on about her son. Something about a year or two in Juvenile Hall. A lot of money wasted on rehab. Milton cannot imagine why anyone would want to berate one’s own offspring to a perfect stranger on a city bus, but neither is he inclined to give it much thought. He reads more of the article on the little man’s death. The man is presumed to have been the victim of robbery as he had no wallet on his person when the body was found. He had been working late in his office at the Bureau of Labor Statistics where he served for two decades as a senior statistician. That he was a statistician, Milton thinks, is quite consistent with yesterday’s conversation.

“Well,” Milton said to the man, “Any fool knows a lottery ticket is a bad investment.”

“Indeed,” the little man agreed. “But permit me, if you will, to test your intuition a bit. I ask to consider two lottery tickets, either of which will give you the same payoff. One is a regular ticket that wins if your exact six-digit number is chosen; the other wins if today’s number and tomorrow’s number are exactly the same. Would you pay the same dollar for that second ticket?”

“Of course not,” Milton said. This man was obviously unaware that he was sitting next to a Wharton MBA.

“What if it paid twice as much as the regular ticket?”
“No!”

“How about *ten times* what the regular ticket paid?”

“Absolutely not.” Milton was beginning to enjoy this conversation. “The probability of my six-digit number winning is …” Milton looked up at the ceiling of the bus for a second.

“One in a million,” the man prompted.

“Right, one in a million. Whereas the chances of that same number coming up twice in a row are …” – just the briefest of pauses – “one-in-a-million *squared*.” Milton was thrilled by the speed at which he had made this calculation. “One-in-a-million-squared is a heck of a lot smaller that one-in-a-million. I would never accept even ten times the payoff.” He could not help feeling the warm glow of smugness.

The little man smiled at Milton. “Yes, very good,” he said, “the chances of your number coming up twice in a row are indeed one-in-a-million squared.” In his triumph Milton felt no need to make reply. “But you forget,” the man continued, “that there are a million different numbers that could be repeated twice. Your intuition tells you that it is all but impossible for the same number to come up twice in a row, when in fact the probability of winning is the exactly the same with either ticket. So, you should have taken the other ticket at ten times the payoff; it’s really a much better deal.”

“That’s absurd ….” But Milton was already beginning to doubt his own answer.

“No shame in being wrong, though, old boy, almost everyone asked would give the same answer you did.” Milton, who was not comforted by being pronounced no stupider than “almost everyone asked” declined the offer to have his mistake verified mathematically with pencil and paper.
“Anyway, it was a trick question,” he said. He shook his newspaper, opened it wide enough to obscure his view of the little man, and returned to the issue of airport security.

“Problem is, he’s just like his damn daddy,” the woman sitting next to Milton is saying. The “he” in this angry sentence is apparently still the reprobate son. Milton feels strangely angry himself. It is not his habit to think ill of the dead, of course, but he remembers, with keen annoyance, his embarrassment at having fallen into what he now thinks of as the little man’s trap.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to embarrass you,” the man said, “We all have poor intuition where probability is concerned. That’s precisely my point.” He set his bulky briefcase on the floor of the bus and put his tiny feet on it. “The lottery is not the worst of it. Look how much money people waste every year paying stock brokers for investment advice.”

Milton turned sharply toward the man. “I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, oh.” The man looked amused as he glanced at Milton’s attaché case. “You aren’t by any chance a stockbroker, are you?”

“I happen to be a senior partner in Cherborg and Wallington.”

“Oh, my,” the little man laughed, “I seem to have put my foot in it again.” He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, “No offense lad, but the statistical evidence is pretty clear: An expensive broker is no better at picking a stock portfolio than is an inexpensive dart board.”

“Is that so?” Milton saw now what a fool he had been to get drawn into conversation with this diminutive know-it-all. Maybe Edna had been right after all.
The man looked calmly at Milton. “Are you familiar with Burton Malkiel’s *Random Walk Down Wall Street*?”

That book was familiar to all denizens of Cherborg and Wallington, where it was reviewed slightly less favorably than *Das Kapital*, but Milton declined to answer the question. With meticulous politeness, he asked, “If stockbrokers are so useless, then perhaps you would explain why I know so many who consistently outperform the Dow Jones Average?”

The little man gave Milton an indulgent smile. “My dear chap, that’s inevitable, isn’t it, with so many brokers in the world. It’s just the Law of Large Numbers. I mean, suppose we had a national contest to see who could flip the most heads in a row?” He arched his back slightly to reach into his pocket and extracted a quarter which he held up between thumb and forefinger. “With two hundred and fifty million Americans, the eventual winner would have flipped something like … 27 or 28 heads in row. People would think that his bloody wrist was magical, wouldn’t they? But his chances of flipping another head would really be no better than yours or mine, now would they?”

Milton reflected how this annoying little person was arrogant, insufferably pompous, and a sufficient explanation of why almost no one of his acquaintance ever rode the bus to work. The man pulled his briefcase back onto his lap and hugged it to his chest. “It’s strange when you think about it, how everything in life is an improbable event. What are the chances that you and I would be sitting here on this bus together.”

Milton now feels a hand shaking his forearm. “Well, do you?” the old woman asks.

“I’m sorry, do I what?”
“Have any children?”

“No, I don’t,” Milton says.

“Well, you’re lucky then.”

For a second Milton thinks about how deeply that remark would affect Edna, were she sitting in this seat instead of him.

“The chances of our sitting here on this bus together are one hundred percent, I should think,” Milton sniffed, “since we obviously are sitting on this bus together.” He felt an overpowering need to right about something.

“Your answer illustrates my point exactly,” the man said, with a nod that Milton found positively infuriating. “Our presence seems inevitable after the fact. But what does it take for the exact you and the exact me to arrive here on this particular bus? Just think about the moment of your conception, for example: millions of sperm where competing to fertilize a single egg. Had any other one of them won the competition, you, as we know you, would not exist.”

Was this man actually discussing sperm at 8:20 on the 903 bus down Wisconsin Avenue? Milton glanced around to see if anyone else was hearing what he was hearing.

“And of course the same logic extends backwards through time. The exact you requires your exact mother and your exact father, each of whom had a most-unlikely conception of their own. Throw in grandparents, great grandparents, and so on back to the dawn of time and the probability of you as an outcome is vanishingly small. You, my friend, are so absurdly unlikely that no responsible mathematician could accept your existence.”
“But a ridiculous way of looking at -- ”

“It’s quite remarkable when you think about, but absolutely everything that really happens is extremely improbable.”

“A thing that happens can’t really be --

“Oops! My stop.” The little man climbed down off the seat and stepped into the aisle. He turned toward Milton. Standing he was not much taller than Milton sitting.

“Good chatting with you, old chap.” He winked at Milton. “Maybe see you tomorrow.” With that he scooted down the aisle toward the exit as the bus slowed to a stop. Milton could not help leaning out to watch him disappear.

See you tomorrow indeed, Milton had thought. He decided that proving Edna to be right might actually be an acceptable price to pay for avoiding further contact with the mathematical pedants who are apparently haunting the mass transit system. He returned to the paper. But for the rest of the ride was unable to concentrate on the Metro article which suggested that, for the foreseeable future, reductions in wait times at Washington National were …highly improbable.

And now the man was dead -- the victim of some random mugger. Milton is surprised by the sadness he felt. He imagines himself describing this to Edna, to whom he poured out the frustrations of yesterday’s conversation.

Once more Milton is startled from his reverie, this time by a small blue and rectangle floated in front of him, so close to his face he instinctively shrinks back toward the window.
“And here it is, can you believe it? Here’s what the stupid boy gets me!”

For a few frightened seconds Milton cannot discern, and is afraid to imagine, what it is she’s assailing him with. It is a Lotto ticket. She holds the ticket by one corner between a stubby forefinger and a thumb whose nail has turned almost black. “Now, nobody never won the Lotto with a number like that, did they?” she said.

Milton recovers, and for a long moment Milton he stares at the ticket. She begins to pull it back but Milton reaches out and holds her wrist. “May I see that?” he asks. He extracts it delicately from between her fingers and takes off his glasses to look at it closely. There it is, the same number again, the same number that was on the little man’s ticket: a string of six consecutive zeroes: 000000. In the top left corner of the ticket he notices a small brown stain.

The woman gives a dry, brittle laugh, and says “I ain’t gonna win 200 million with a bunch of zeroes. I just ain’t that lucky a person.”

Milton looks at the old woman, for the first time really looks at her. Everything about her – the thin gray hair, the swollen knuckles, the great expanse of her bottom on the seat – confirms for him the validity of her statement: she just isn’t that lucky a person. Not a very lucky a person at all, Milton thinks. And her already-poor luck has just taken a turn for the much-worse. “It’s strange isn’t it,” he says to her softly, “but when you think about it, everything that actually happens is really quite improbable.” He holds out his hand to her, surprised to feel that he really wants her to take it. “My name is Milton Rosenow, may I ask what yours is?”