

Second place: "Retribution"

by Paul Mann, Sacramento

Denny mumbled to himself as he sat outside the boss' office.

"Excuse me?" Jensen's secretary asked.

Denny lifted his massive head, his chins expanding like a fleshy accordion. He fixed an empty gaze upon her and she retreated back to her keyboard.

He didn't care. This was the day he got back for everything—the fat jokes, the rudeness and the daily torture of coming to work. He pictured walking into Jensen's office, shoulders slumped and head bowed in typical Denny style, putting the boss at ease. He'd be his usual docile self, disarming Jensen to the point that he would feel comfortable enough to throw his feet up on the desk and begin to chew Denny out. After a few minutes Jensen would ask Denny what it was he was obviously trying to conceal in his hand buried deep in his coat pocket. Then Denny Carlyle would show Walter Jensen who was boss.

Denny's plan went according to script. As expected, at the appropriate time, Jensen, comfortably reclining in his oversized leather chair, nodded toward Denny's hand hidden deep in his coat pocket.

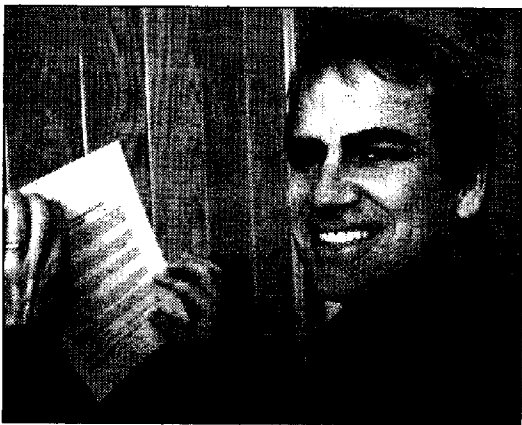
"What ya got there, Denny?"

Jensen nervously inquired.

"My future!" Denny barked back.

Denny raised his hand to reveal a winning lottery ticket and slapped it down on Jensen's desk like a royal flush. Then he sat back, clutched his chest, and died of a burst aorta.

Jensen walked around the desk, checked Denny's pulse, smiled, tucked the lottery ticket into his pocket, and dialed 911.



Paul Mann can
write anywhere.

Judge's comment: In the true spirit of O. Henry, "Retribution" walks the reader down a narrow, expected path, and then takes a hard right. Instead of fulfilling our expectations, they are shattered and replaced by the reinforcing reminder that there is no justice—even when we can see it coming. Denny's characterization is excellent, and we are given just enough description to visualize Denny and Mr. Jensen as the stereotypical underdog and the tyrant boss. While I found myself rooting for Denny, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd be more like Jensen, and just walk. It's an excellent paradox.