

# Already A Winner!

by "Thomas Daulton"

**T**ime to start murdering rats, Tony thought grimly. Late again, nervous, sweating, Tony bumbled past the receptionists, wearing his sheepish half-smile. He attempted the best tiptoe he could muster, while hurrying to his cubicle, with arms straining around a half-case of StimuSoda and a pair of those absurdly noisy cellophane grocery bags hanging from each.

Loud indistinct voices clashed angrily from behind the closed conference room door near the RatScan company lobby. But Tony kept walking tiptoe anyway, with those damn crinkling bags. Bad enough that he had to waste the precious lunch hour between his two jobs, shopping on a Saturday when it was the most crowded. But it had to be done today—or wait 'til Thursday, his day off from ConTek. Damned if he was gonna boil that last egg at home, unless he had ketchup to go with it...! The toast and maybe an instant soup... What else had he bought? Had he even checked the sweepstakes on the receipt?

That was the one thought that could break through the residual panic left-over from his tardy entrance. If he'd won anything, and hurried right back, maybe the clerk would recognize him and let him claim his prize! Eyes crusty with fatigue, he groped for the small piece of paper buried among the cereal and processed cheese.

THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING QUEEZEE-MART™  
15:57:48 SATURDAY, JULY 29, 2017  
CLERK #: 1138 (F. J. DINWIDDLE)  
MILKLOFAT1/2GAL \$ 16.75  
SNEEZCHEEZ8oz \$ 11.32  
COUPON \$- 0.50  
OOZINGNOODLE 16@5.75 = \$ 92.00  
HONYBLSTCEREAL \$ 28.39  
DEHYDRATOAST \$ 32.74  
STIMUSODA1/2CASE \$ 37.25  
TRKYTRIPESALAMI \$ 83.94  
OATBRANYOGHRT 4@ 8.95=\$ 35.80  
INSTAKETCHUP8oz \$ 12.95  
SUBTOTAL \$350.64  
TAX @0.155 \$ 54.35  
TOTAL \$404.99  
-DEBIT CARD \$404.99

SORRY! YOU WERE NOT A WINNER THIS TIME.  
PLEASE COME AGAIN & PLAY QUEEZEE-  
MART™S ALL-YOU-CAN-SCARF SWEEPSTAKES! !

*No big surprise there*, he conceded. Wearily Tony flopped into his chair, leaned his head back, and wondered how he'd survive another 8-hour shift.

"Tony?" Pam Ganio, the receptionist, called his name and hesitantly stuck her head into his cubicle. Another minute and he would probably have dozed off like that, if she hadn't roused him. Wouldn't the Veep like to find *that* when he got out of his meeting? He fell forward out of his reverie.

"Pam! I was halfway zonked. I guess I'm still warming-up today." Pam always seemed calm and well-rested; she'd won a lifetime train-pass in a sweepstakes months ago. She probably catnapped during her commute between jobs. Tony spent his time tearing his hair out stuck in traffic. "What did you need?"

"Oh, nothing much... Just passing out paychecks..." she offered him a sealed envelope.

*'Nothing much', is right, honey...* he fought back the urge to snicker. *Two miserable data-entry jobs and part-time mail-stuffing at home. I get by on a measly \$95K a year because I live off instant soup and turkey tripe salami. Hell, if I wanted more pay, I'd REALLY have to put in serious hours; I like my sleep too much for that.* Tony ripped straight through the typed lettering, "TONY WALL—CONFIDENTIAL", with a crooked finger.

The conference room door opened, releasing a wave of grumbling people in suits. Pam sprang back to her reception desk with the deliberate grace of a young doe, in time to hand stacks of phone-message slips to the meeting participants. The last to exit, a portly man in a faded brown suit, bypassed Pam and trudged towards Tony's cubicle.

He paused to snap at another records manager, who was copying a stack of forms. "Get a bennie to do that! Your time is more valuable than theirs!" Hurriedly, she changed places with the nearest bennie. The bennies were workers whose *only* compensation was the company's medical or insurance package. Students or interns. Tony remembered what that was like, before he got his bio-statistics degree. It made for a long day, classes plus eight hours of work for no pay, but it was just a matter of preference. It depended which privilege—health care, housing, or transportation—you were most afraid of losing.

Terrified, the bennie worked the copy machine like an oarsman on a Roman galley. Tony pretended not to watch, vainly trying to resist his vulgar instinct for entertainment. The bennie was just another loser, and it never helped anything to pay attention to losers. At least you could pull yourself up from the downtrodden masses if you worked hard.

As the Veep approached, Tony hastily began the steps necessary to bring a big stack of numbers onto his computer screen, so it'd look like he'd been interrupted from something important. He launched the company's proprietary analysis program, and stabbed a red button inset into his desk

repeatedly, while his boss closed the distance to his cubicle.

In response to his frantic entreaty, a lab rat from a specific sample population in the lower sub-basement was corralled by mechanical arms. It was stuffed into a laser diffracting spectroscope and flash-vaporized. As the lasers shone through the airborne rat particles, the animal's genetic code flashed across Tony's screen:

AGTA CCTA GAGT = 0.56% GTTA CAAC  
TGAA = 1.02% TACT GGTA AATG = 2.02%  
GATG TCTG ACTG = 2.10% TTAC TGTA  
AGAT = 2.95% CGGC ATTC TCAG = 3.10%  
CGAT GACT ACCG = 3.25% CGGC ACGA  
TAGC = 4.01% GACC TGAT CAAG = 4.02%

"When did you get into that BattleQuick stuff?" Mr. Storn asked. The Veep hovered behind Tony's desk a moment, as if to heighten the anticipation. "I thought I transferred you out of the Army-contract division."

"Oh, uh, I'm not—not really," he stammered, "Chris just got a funny result yesterday and asked me to take a quick look at it." He pressed a few more keys and the rat's chromosomal epitaph scrolled off his screen. "What's up, Mr. Storn?" he looked up at his boss with an amiable expression.

"It's crisis time for that Thoro-Sporidichlora-Cyanase-D Inhibitor project, again," the Veep growled, rubbing his forehead. "The Raleigh office has been talking to the client behind our backs and pushing the long-term angle. You know Scott's argument.

"He keeps telling me that Gunkoba, Inc., will pay us for future genetic damage studies, on the whole family of Sporidichlora-Cyanase pharmaceuticals, if we give them a low price on the rats we're testing right now. My view is that it was a coup to steal this job from CheatSmart in the first place; who knows if we'll get more work like this in the future? We can't sell ourselves short, and the proposal is due in a month.

"Somebody's got to go out there and protect our office's budget from Scott's red pen. Normally I'd do it but three other proposals are supposed to cross my desk by next Friday. I just can't spend any more time on it."

*Uh-oh, here it comes,* Tony realized.

"I'd like you to clear your calendar and plan on leaving next week. You'll stay there one week and make sure the proposal goes out with *our* numbers and not *theirs*."

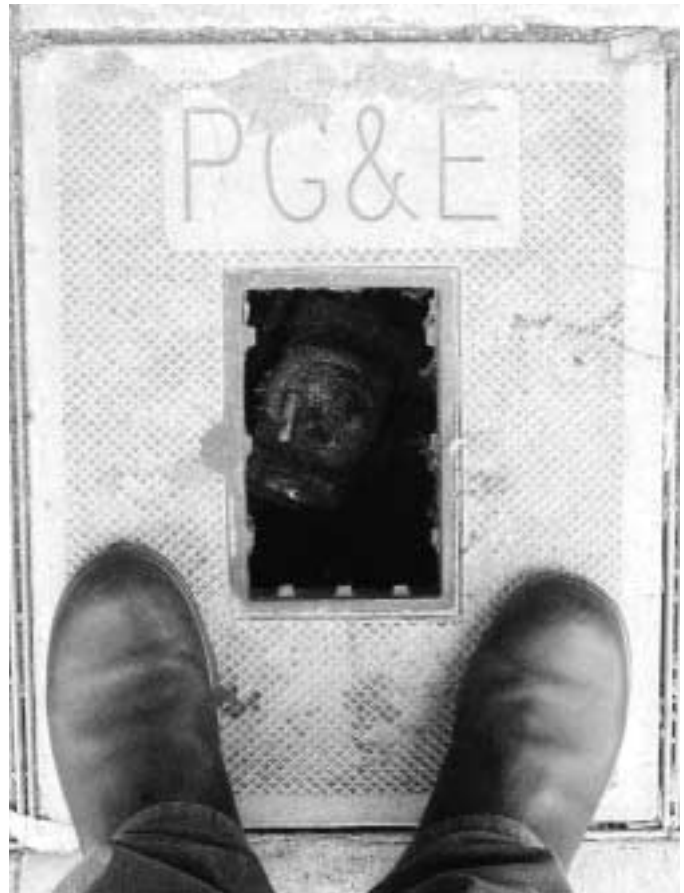
Tony fought back a shout. This was completely unacceptable. To go to North Carolina, he'd have to leave his other jobs for a week, and blow all the vacation he'd been saving up at those other firms.

"Sure, boss, no problem. I'll have Pam book me a flight," Tony smiled cheerfully. Unfortunately there was the Corprit-Tude aspect to think about. Even though the entire American workforce was working two or more jobs (the national average was 2.42), each manager of each job had to believe *theirs* was your number-one breadwinning

position. Otherwise, if one manager suspected that you had another job to 'fall back on', you would find yourself 'phased out' when the next internal audit came.

The Veep rose, clapped him on the shoulder, muttered some thanks or compliment that Tony barely heard. Meanwhile, he tried to put aside his irritation by focusing on the opportunity. Maybe this would prove to the higher-ups that he was management material. Then the shoe would be on the other foot! Some poor loser running between three jobs would be doing the legwork for him! If he pinched pennies a little more, he could quit his other two jobs and work, maybe, 80 hours a week at one job instead of 90 hours at three jobs—not counting the savings in commute time. The extra ten hours of sleep were even more attractive than the title, the salary, or the responsibility.

Somehow that thought buoyed him up during the next eight hours of number-crunching and kept him from actually falling asleep again. But, as usual, his second shift passed with all the vigor and clarity of an out-of-body experience. He couldn't get worked-up about this Sporidichlora-Cyanase project because the crisis had been there when he was first hired; it would be there after he left; and there was no way to resolve it by working through official channels. When it came down to the wire, somebody somewhere would finally stop covering their ass long enough to make a rational decision, and the crisis would instantly evaporate. Another would spring up immediately to take its place.



D.S. Black

He un-docked his compu-tablet at the end of his shift; as he rose from his chair, he swayed on his feet, lightheaded, like a balloon in a breeze, after working sixteen hours since he woke up at 5AM this morning. His hands quivered. Now it was almost midnight, but the nervous energy he'd relied on to push him through his shift refused to leave him. The only thing that might help unwind him was a beer or two at the nearby "RatCellar," at the end of the RatScan complex.

Down the hall, he stuffed a ten-spot into the vending machine and removed another cold bottle of StimuSoda. Absently, he swigged from the bottle so that he could focus his mind long enough to lose it in a glass of beer. Blow an hour at the RatCellar, do some envelopes at home, and still get a good four hours' sleep before his next shift began.

He couldn't remember what the weather was like when he had entered the building; so he felt unprepared for what he'd find when he left. The elevator released him into the lobby and he spilled across the tiled floor with the rest of the silent data workers. Their footsteps made a binary conversation which was not replaced by human talk until they left the double glass doors. At that point, the co-workers and acquaintances let loose a little light chatter, as if they'd been afraid their speech would emerge as numbers when they were still inside the building.

By rote, his pulse started to race as he finished the soda and checked under the cap. "SORRY! NO PRIZE! DRINK MORE!" Tony crushed the empty bottle in his hands; it sprang back into its original shape with a plastic growl. He pitched it towards a trash can and it circled the rim a few times, reluctant to go away.

Then he looked up, across the street, and gasped. During his shift, someone had painted the TransAmerica Pyramid to resemble a bottle of StimuSoda. The garish red-and-white stripes were drawing stares from all over the block, and the occasional squeak of brakes from distracted commuters. Apparently the ad served its purpose, forcing people to read about StimuSoda's "You'll-Never-Be-Thirsty-Again" sweepstakes. ("ODDS OF WINNING APPROXIMATELY 1 IN 1.25E08") The TransAmerica building joined a group of a dozen Downtown buildings which had been done-up to resemble various products: detergents, breakfast cereal, canned soup; making the city look like the toy room or kitchen of an untidy giant.

Tony sighed. Jobs were scarce and people everywhere worked unreasonable hours just to catch up. But as if to blot out any talk of an ongoing economic crisis, the ad sector always found money for ever-more-extravagant displays: orbital billboards, exotic computer viruses that penetrated every unwilling computer screen. *Who exactly decided 'We don't have enough advertising around here yet, we need a logo on each little thumbtack head and hot dog skin.'? Just gimme a few minutes alone with the guy in a sealed room.*

The red neon glare from the enormous StimuSoda bounced back at him from all the windows in his field of

vision. But that didn't matter; he had reached the wide panes of glass marking the RatCellar. He slipped the bouncer a twenty for the cover charge. Reflexively he glanced at his receipt to see if he'd won free admission; crumpled it and tossed it into an ashtray. He stepped inside to a burst of heat and noise.

Saturday night and the place was packed. A double handful of off-duty workers crowded the tiny dance floor, swaying and gyrating like the mechanism of some humanoid clock. He brushed his way to the bar and signaled for a glass of liquid anesthetic. Tony scanned around to see if there was anyone he'd like to meet.

"Every time we get close to finishing the report, the boss orders up another round of backchecks..."

"...expenses are up from the previous fiscal year..."

"...And the surveys have to be cross-correlated with Web hits and discretionary expenditures..."

Just listening to words like these jostled a part of his brain which was already numb with overuse. It felt like poking a bruised funnybone. A dark-haired woman, black slacks and a velvet coat, sauntered into the bar alone. Tony took the opportunity to launch himself away from the bar towards her. Without so much as a word of greeting or an eyeblink of acknowledgment, he slipped into her stride and bumped and grinded with her in time to the music.

A few sweaty moments were all that Tony's tired body would allow him. As the tune ended, he nudged her back towards his space at the bar and took a cool gulp of his beer. One eye on the dark-haired beauty, he flipped over his beer receipt, unsurprisingly devoid of a winner's certificate.

"Ellen," she murmured over the bar's din.

"Tony," he responded with a winning smile. "So, do you work mornings?"

"No... you?"

"Yeah," replied Tony. *Hell with the four hours' sleep.* He struggled to keep up the veneer of a smile. "Then we better not waste any more time!" she smiled coyly. "So what if I follow you home? Limo ride to work tomorrow afternoon? Movie next weekend, maybe?"

*Damn, but women set their sights high these days.* It wasn't as if he'd won any sweepstakes for limo service or movie tickets. Driving her to work in his beat-up '09 Toyota was unlikely to impress her friends. Magazine subscriptions, that was all he'd managed to win; obviously not the entertainment she was accustomed to. Laundry detergent for ten thousand washes. His lifetime supply of fish food wasn't much use when he couldn't afford a fishtank or any fish. Two movie tickets were basically out of the question on his budget. He mustered up a sly smile. "You may find I'm full of surprises."

"Ah-huh. And so's everyone. Too bad; you really were a good dancer. Great rhythm." She hopped off the barstool and slinked across the dance floor again. Damn! He should've played on that angle. Tony had always wanted to take up music. He had taken guitar lessons, back in high

school; but never had the time to keep it up. That would have been something to impress her with. He re-assessed the bar scene. It was a well-dressed and hungry crowd; soft voices around the dim, smoky room crossed like rapiers and cut the most suave of players down to dejected washouts left and right.

His fatigue caught up with him and he didn't feel much like competing. His resources were pretty meager right now. *Nope, can't even put-off the furniture bill this month. Those guys would repossess my bed and sofa just like THAT.* Nothing he could really spare. Time to vacate the premises and get some sleep.

\* \* \*

Reaching his apartment, he sorted carefully through the daily pile of junk mail, pen ready. *No, I do NOT want to be billed later for a whipped-cream spritzer. No, I do NOT want to be billed later for a birthstone-sequin sweatshirt.* He hated having to do this. But ever since the Supreme Court upheld the Negative-Check-Off case, it was vital to read through all your junk mail thoroughly.

RETURN THIS FORM TO  
DECLINE THE PURCHASE  
BEING OFFERED ABOVE, OR  
YOUR CREDIT CARD WILL BE  
BILLED \$599.99 ON SEP-  
TEMBER 16, 2017.

Again the idle fantasy crossed his mind: *Whoever invented this negative check-off scam... wish I had 'em alone in a room for five minutes.* People's credit card numbers had been accessible to companies who could afford to purchase the lists for almost a decade. Speak of the devil; here was his credit card bill. As usual, he signed over his RatScan paycheck to ViMaCard and sealed the envelope. As usual, he purchased another four weeks of freedom, while adding another handful of pebbles to the landslide of debt waiting to devour him in the future.

So much for his RatScan paycheck; the ConTek paycheck was likewise gone. Now to make sure he ate next week, by stuffing ads into envelopes. To make enough money for a grocery run next week, he'd need to stuff 700 envelopes, over the next three nights, unless he gave up some of his precious day off from ConTek on Thursday. Tony took a deep breath, and tried to convince himself that he was surviving. But that was a tough task when the envelopes he stuffed netted him only \$0.65 each. If he fell behind his quota, he'd be doomed to

instant soup and no luxuries for at least a week.

And what a time for Storn to order him to Raleigh! He was tempted to refuse when he went back to RatScan tomorrow. But the mere fact that people had other jobs simply wasn't an excuse anymore. Everyone had to be more productive these days. If only one of his jobs could get him off the hook..

His compu-tablet beeped with a new message, startling him as his eyelids drooped. *Whew! Just as well.* Clicking the READ button, he brought it to his screen: I'M TRYING TO GET A BAND TOGETHER. PETE SAYS YOU USED TO PLAY GUITAR. INTERESTED? —CRAIG TIBRON.

At first his mind rejected the note completely. *Doesn't Craig have anything better to do than bother me at 1 AM? He knows I'm busy.* But he was too tired to hold onto the annoyance. *Craig means well. I did useta play guitar. Cool idea, nice try.* But playing in a band would mean brushing up, practicing, writing songs, booking gigs... it was too much work. Not when he had to crank out a couple hundred envelopes each night to stay on schedule, and then fight his way downtown

2x LIFESPAN!

Most people stop living at the end of their natural life. Who says you have to???—We'll DOUBLE your lifespan!

newlife.com  
(LIFE IS BEING HERE)

Don't accept your so-called *natural* limits... Go Job Hunting AGAIN with our patented suite of organware!

Dimitri Loukakos

and back twice each day just to fool his managers into thinking he actually wanted to work there instead of juggling spreadsheets, computer games, and phone calls whenever they passed his cubicle.

So instead he docked his compu-tablet to his home port, to gain the extra connection speed, and logged into the website of the lawyer who was paying him to stuff envelopes. He downloaded the advertisement letter that he was supposed to mail out to a select list of CEO's.

UNLESS YOU DECLINE BY SEPTEMBER 19, 2017, YOU WILL BE RETAINING THE SERVICES OF THE BEST CORPORATE LAWYER AROUND! LOOK WHAT J. F. LEE-BAY, ESQUIRE, HAS ACCOMPLISHED IN THE ARBITRATION COURTS OF THE WORLD HEALTH-INDUSTRY ORGANIZATION.

Suddenly Tony's eyes popped halfway out of his skull. His envelope-stuffing employer, whom he'd never met and never dealt with except through a website, had taken on a legal case involving Sporidichlora-Cyanase type drugs! "TRIBUNAL UPHOLDS VIRTUAL DRUG TESTING: 'THE PROFIT POTENTIAL OF THIS FAMILY OF DRUGS IS TOO GREAT TO BE RESTRICTED BY SAFETY LAWS'," the WH/IO tribunal had concluded, in favor of Leebay's client CheatSmart—the RatScan competitor who simulated rodential genetic studies on massive supercomputers.

No way Storn would send him on a week-long assignment to Raleigh if Sporidichlora-Cyanase had already snuck around the testing laws. Gunkoba, Inc., had no conceivable need for RatScan DNA testing if the World Health-Industry courts had made this decision, which would mean anyone questioning the safety of these drugs would be subject to a fine.

In which case nobody would care about the fee numbers on a doomed proposal. He pulled that page out of his miniprinter and stood up. This was a big relief. It was tempting to drive back to RatScan immediately, to minimize the airline cancellation fee.

As he put his hand on his doorknob, though, he started second-guessing himself. What would Storn think if Tony beamed into his office tonight, a big smile on his face, and explained why the trip had to be canceled? Mr. Storn would calmly explain that they had to put out the most accurate proposal possible whether or not it was going to be accepted. It wasn't Tony's decision to make, the client might well want the study anyway to quote in its ads. Corprit-Tude again. Managers, they were like cats: they didn't come when you called them, they had to think it was their own idea.

Would his boss read this in the paper or hear it on the news? Doubtful. Storn was probably making a half-bill a year; not enough money to spend time with his family, but enough to hire someone else to filter his news for him. This WH/IO decision would eventually get passed down to him by the

legal department at RatScan, of course; but not before Tony had to leave on this trip. Tony sat down again, dejected; he almost felt a physical sensation as the week's vacation he thought he'd rescued slipped through his fingers again. He turned back to the pile of junk-mail envelopes he had to stuff.

The blood left his face again as he realized he had an edge. Storn had to read his junk mail; everybody did, nowadays. And his part-time envelope-stuffing job gave him access. In fact, mailing this information to Storn would even earn him \$0.65.

He uplinked to Leebay's website, ignoring the obligatory random advertisement virus:

STARVING? AMERI CORP-BANK WANTS TO HELP YOU!! YOU'LL LOVE OUR GREAT RATES ON FOOD AND CLOTHING LOANS.

He downloaded his weekly list of target addresses from his E-mail. Then he accessed the on-line telephone book and copied Storn's address to the top of his list. Enjoying his work for the first time in ages, he carefully folded a hard-copy of Leebay's newsletter and stuffed it into an envelope with Storn's address. Then Tony began printing another 700 newsletters for the other suckers on his list. What he earned after *this* licking session would be well worth the rubbery taste of envelope adhesive in his mouth tomorrow.

\* \* \*

"I'm afraid we're going to have to distance ourselves from that proposal, Tony. If Scott's office wants to put it out with the numbers they estimated, then let Scott take the heat for it."

"But Mr. Storn," Tony protested. "Those guys at Gunkoba are counting on us. What if they need the estimates for budgeting other drug studies next year? We want to put out a quality proposal, don't we?" Inwardly, he prayed he wasn't overstating his case.

"You're right, of course, Tony," the Veep commended him. "But it's just not going to happen. A week-long trip to Raleigh for a proposal that's going to fly like a lead balloon just is not within our promo budget right now. Quality is one thing, but we're not in this for our health." ("At least, most of us aren't," he amended, shooting a quick glance at one of the bennies.) "Get back to work on the Pterygia/Pinguecula project. That one's a cash cow. The bottom line is, we make money first, and worry about quality later." His boss grinned and clapped him on the shoulder; hoping to imply that an unusually candid and truthful statement was facetious, by making light of it.

*Geez, what are the odds?* Tony wondered as he walked back to his desk. *That I would find that piece of information just in time to use it. Maybe there's something to this sweepstakes business after all.* Instead of sitting down, he slipped out to the corridor, paid \$10 for another StimuSoda, and checked under the cap. ♣