

The Lottery of Our Lives

By Mel Duncan

On December 1, 1969, many of the guys who had been at the wine guzzling birthday party for Bob Van Heuveln a few weeks earlier, crammed into the lounge on Dupre 4 East. As we arrived that evening, we quietly nodded to each other. Nobody said much. It felt like a wake. We silently huddled in front of the TV. CBS had preempted Andy Griffith's *Mayberry RFD*. There would be no Aunt Bea tonight. Instead, we had gathered unwillingly to play Russian roulette, except some old white guy on the screen was pulling the trigger. We were there to watch the Draft Lottery. It seemed insane. The TV stage looked more like a hastily assembled bingo hall than the site of an official government ceremony where thousands of young men's futures would be decided. One by one men in suits, some old, some young, drew blue capsules from a large glass bowl and handed them to an expressionless woman seated at a card table. She slowly opened each capsule, one by one, extracting a small paper like a fortune from a giant fortune cookie. She then handed it to the wretched General Hersey. He called out the birth date written on the fortune. He sounded like an executioner, just doing his duty but revealing a slight relish. An eternity stretched between each drawing of a blue capsule and the announcement of the next birthday.

We all stared at the screen, avoiding eye contact. We were together attending the most significant event of many of our lives and, at that moment, I felt very alone. SEPTEMBER 14, Hersey called out the date. We still weren't looking at each other. Then Ken in a voice of quiet resignation acknowledged that his birthday was September 14th. He was number 1 in the lottery, a sure bet to be drafted. I was angry, really angry. I wanted May 22nd to be the first date. I was ready to fight the draft and wanted to be number 1. Instead, I watched most of the year draw by as friends quietly conceded as their birthdays were announced. May 22nd was 326th to be drawn. I literally had no chance to be drafted. Damn it. Damn it. DAMN IT!

Jon Schroeder was 55th. He would likely be drafted. I sat with him most of the night in Wally Hall as he had with me less than a month earlier when I had gotten drunk at Bob's party after watching Nixon's silent majority speech. In my stupor on November 3rd, I couldn't let go of my older brother, Larry, who sat in Da Nang while I sat in the comfort of Macalester College. Jon mainly held on to me that night. Now, on December 1st I could return the kindness. We talked but were mostly silent. I told him that I would gladly exchange numbers with him. He didn't know what to do. We discussed options and ways that he could get out.

I decided that night that I would still resist the draft. If they weren't going to come to me, I would come to them. Eighteen months earlier I had walked down to the Davenport post office and signed up for the draft on my 18th birthday, now I would resign. I would use my Conscientious Objector application which I had begun writing to explain how I not only conscientiously objected to war, I also conscientiously objected to taking part in conscription. I would take Mitau's Con Law class to develop a constitutional basis for my claim. As the flyer handed out at the Moratorium in DC a few weeks before read, "The draft is a form of involuntary servitude." And, "a high lottery number does not free you from the draft."

First semester of our sophomore year illuminated a path that I had already been walking and forged my commitment to actively resist violence through creative nonviolence, a commitment I still follow today.

Do you have memories of Draft Night? [Share them on our class Facebook page.](#)