



# Numbers

INTERNATIONAL  
SHORT  
STORY  
CONTEST



Strange Days Books



EE-12

## PREFACE

Dear reader

This is the 10th consecutive year of the International Short Story Contest held by [www.eyelands.gr](http://www.eyelands.gr) -still the only one based in Greece. It is unbelievable that we reached our tenth year already!

In your hands you hold the twelfth English speaking book published by "Strange Days Books". Ten of them were collections of the short-listed stories of the international short story contest and two from the flash fiction contest.

For another year, many writers from countries all over the world took part in the contest, a fact that makes us feel delighted. It was encouraging and stimulating to read the writings from so many nationalities. It was really difficult on the beginning but now we are glad to say that we run one of the most successful literary contests at least in Europe. Furthermore with your support we are since 2018 to fulfill our dream for international book awards (Eyelands Book Awards) and also to welcome many writers from all over the world as guests in our Three Rock's Residency Program.

Many thanks to all of you who participated in our 10th International Short Story Contest! Thank you all who supported us with your writings all these years!!

Gregory Papadoyiannis

## FIRST PRIZE

**Kathryn Holzman**  
**The Long Lost Bottom**

*They were paying out rope in the vain attempt to fathom their truly immeasurable capacity for marvelousness. Thoreau, Walden*

Joe understood the innate desire to calculate the truth of things.

An unremarkable man, he sat in the staff cafeteria among colleagues who did not hesitate to state their beliefs with great conviction.

"The man's an ass," Larry from Legal declared while helping himself to a third piece of pizza. "He wouldn't know a Hail Mary pass if he saw one." On Mondays, Larry, who didn't have an athletic bone in his skinny body, frequently provided commentary on the coaches of national teams whose games had been televised over the weekend.

"An ass who is paid more than a University President," Stan replied. The frazzled compliance officer, whose third child had just entered college, brought every conversation back to tuition. "My savings flew right over that goal post. Too bad the football didn't do the same." He took another bite of his tuna fish sandwich. A brown-bagger through and through, he took each loss personally. Always had.

Joe was careful not to let pizza sauce stain his starched white shirt. An accountant, he maintained the office betting pool. Calculated the wins. Deducted the losses. Joe minded the pot and believed in the truth-telling of numbers. The ass had won more than he had lost. Larry, who might have won a little this week, would only re-invest his winnings and lose them the following week.

The guys would bet on anything. Weather, politics, the likelihood that a popular reality TV star would win Dancing with the Stars. The spreadsheets kept getting more elaborate. Sometimes Joe was awake until three in the morning determining the odds.

"How much do you want to bet that ..." The possibilities were endless. Larry bet that their boss Stacy, a no-nonsense MBA, was shopping online. Stan put money on his conviction that Stacy, who preferred to stay in her office with the blinds down, was talking to Human Resources, pressuring them to hire more women. They bet on it all and waited to see who would come out on top. Some bets had been outstanding for months now.

The guys spoke as if they had a vast knowledge of any subject, knew the ins and outs of every office scandal. They took a side in every conflict and bet on the answers to questions the very instant that uncertainty begun to niggle at them. And they did this, Joe noticed, with enviable passion. A



passion which demanded that he illuminate their curiosity with elegant formulas that rewarded the winners or penalized the losers objectively.

Long into the night, the light from Joe's personal computer lit his bedroom with an eerie, electronic glow. Often when he headed for his single bed, exhausted after a day of finalizing monthly reports, the blinking cursor demanded more attention. Next, it flashed, what should we look at next? Joe was incapable of ignoring the cursor's endless queries. He backed his data up with meticulous devotion, never knowing when a bet might come to its logical conclusion. He saved his calculations with an accountant's devotion to detail.

Lately, around the lunch table, Joe had begun to feel as if he could see right through his co-workers, as if knowing the bottom line sharpened his perceptions, allowed him to rise above the daily give and take of their banter and see the world more clearly.

As he chewed his pepperoni and onion pizza methodically, he was startled by a feeling he could only describe as ecstasy.

"Two to one," Larry was saying. "it's going to rain tonight."

This was joy. Larry's recklessness, Stan's skeptical scrutiny. Like Buddha, Joe smiled enigmatically, waiting to see how much the guys would ante up. In Walden, Thoreau observed: "It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it." Joe, who had been disappointed during his one visit to Walden Pond, who had found the revered park overcrowded and littered with garbage, felt himself ascending to a purer plane. Plumbing the bottom, you might say. He breathed deeply, imagined his heartbeat like a hungry cursor, craving input. Already, he had moved beyond the petty wager. He was entering data, gauging the sunlight outside the window as storm clouds threatened the horizon.

He had become an arbiter of the truth.

The cursor kept him honest. He sensed the electronic blip even now, blinking with every pump of his heart. He tested his pulse, comforted to feel the gentle throb on alert for input.

The sticky table in the staff lounge remained cluttered, stained by the bottoms of abandoned coffee cups. Small plastic containers of unused condiments lingered for days, turning putrid and poisonous, before the cleaning crew swept them into large black plastic garbage bags. No matter what, Joe's co-workers wagered, probing every aspect of their dreary lives for contests, betting everything they earned on his ability to see through uncertainty. The offerings that they handed over to Joe anointed him. They became accustomed to his beatific smile, the noble nod he had recently adopted when accepting cold cash.

Stacy, at a distance from the office shenanigans, only saw that her staff was content. Her employees seldom took sick days; work assignments

were completed on time. It did not strike her as unusual that her accountant arrived at work with dark circles under his deep-set eyes. She saw it as an occupational hazard. From behind the closed blinds of her office, she listened to the frivolity in the staff room, unaware of the pending wagers being placed on her every move.

The cursor, however, was insatiable. Each evening, after a light supper of canned soup and toast, Joe sat down at his computer to enter the day's data, always in the same order. First, he entered new wagers, the who, what, where. Each bet on a separate spreadsheet, parsed into cells, rows and columns. He calculated the odds. Then he totaled the days' take on a master spreadsheet whose elaborate formulas linked the individual bets. He was always careful to balance his entries. Any discrepancy, no matter how small, could be a sign of a significant error and thus had to be investigated and corrected before he could proceed.

Bets were settled and closed out. The take of victorious co-workers calculated. The distributions deducted from the master spreadsheet. Everything balanced again.

As Joe went about his work, the cursor blinked like a contented kitten, following his actions attentively, purring at his side. Joe never felt alone. The hours passed, the sun set, his neighbors closed their shades and then turned off their lights. Joe, confident in his role as custodian of this ordered universe, was lulled by the muffled clicking of his keyboard. He seldom took a break, even for a warm cup of tea, although he did keep the kettle plugged in, just in case.

Only when he had entered every chit of the day's activities, did he become aware of the cursor, begging for more. Sensing the cursor's impatience, he reviewed his work for redundancy, applied the rules of relational data base management to minimize unnecessary calculations. By midnight, the numbers sometimes rebelled, began to blur as if they too were exhausted. Joe ignored the impatient throb of an incipient headache. It was late. It was dark.

But the cursor blinked. It needed more. Ecstasy, the immeasurable capacity for marvelousness, Joe discovered, did not come cheap. It required discipline, perseverance and practice. By 1 a.m., he found himself typing random numbers and then rearranging them until they arrived at a logical, mathematically sound pattern.

Walden Pond's depths, located close to the densely populated metropolitan area of Boston, were murky. When Stacy had scheduled the office outing at the nearby park, Joe had been unable to relate to Thoreau's reverence. If it hadn't been for the question posited (How deep?), the visit would have held no interest for him. If his co-workers, who were angling for fish, hadn't placed the bet, the pond would have entirely slipped his mind.



But now that bet (How deep?) was spreadsheet 150. Whether Stacy slept with the CEO was 225. He had, Joe calculated, over 1000 unresolved bets. The cursor was getting greedy. The ecstasy to which he had become accustomed, like all addictions, had become unforgiving. Joe resolved to design a spreadsheet that prioritized which bets needed to be closed out. He simply needed to apply some discipline. As he worked, the cursor beeped, indicating its alarm.

"Please," he pleaded, craving a decent night's sleep.

He entitled the sheet that would keep it all in check "Resolution." Every time he tried to save the spreadsheet, the cursor froze and his work was lost.

The guys became impatient.

"Hey, Joe," Larry said, "what's up? You're falling behind."

Stan handed Joe the take for the latest pool. "How many times do you think the fire alarm will go off today?" The emergency notification system in the office was being repaired. The endless jarring tests were driving them all up the wall.

Stan looked at his co-worker with concern. Joe pocketed the money, without experiencing even a frisson of pleasure. Their expectations seemed overwhelming. Increasingly, his evenings were consumed by his attempts to build Resolution, looking for a way out. The cursor and he were at an impasse.

He tried everything. He pretended to be hard at thought as he keyed in File Save, hoping that the cursor would not notice, but his effort was wasted. The cursor could not be fooled. He began to see the blinking light as belligerent, unworldly in its expectations. It seemed determined to call him on his arrogance, rob him of his capacity for pleasure. It arbitrarily froze in the middle of the most routine calculations. Even the simplest of his spreadsheets became riddled with errors. Data disappeared in the night when he could no longer avoid dozing off in his chair.

Like many idealists, he had been brought to his knees. He had not understood the costs.

Thoreau, that cocky calculator of Walden's depths, only spent two years at the pond. During that time, it is rumored that he ate his dinner every night at Emerson's house. His benefactor fed him when the writer's own cupboards were bare. So much for self-sufficiency. Joe was on his own.

Stacy called the accountant to her office.

"Joe, I'm worried about you. Your recent work is not up to par."

Her computer was angled on the corner of her desk. Joe saw it. Watching him.

"I'm doing the best I can, given the circumstances," he answered. On Stacy's desk, the cursor begged to differ. It was everywhere, determined to keep Joe honest.

"What can I do to help?"

Joe thought of Resolution, the sheet that the cursor refused to let him save. His boss would never understand.

"Are there any resources I can allocate that might enable you to catch up? Do you need your software updated?" At the same time that Stacy talked to the accountant, she was keeping tabs on her e-mail. Her fingernails were polished blood red. Her eyes flitted back and forth. Despite his bosses' obvious effort to present a sympathetic face, Joe saw only the cursor, blinking.

Stacy's phone rang. "Hello," she said, holding up a red talon indicating she would be only a minute.

"Marvelous," she said. Turning her back on Joe.

As she spoke, her computer went into sleep mode. Pictures of her children paraded across the screen hypnotically. Joe watched the school-age children grinning proudly at birthday parties, walking the beach during summer vacations, holding up trophies at gymnastics competitions.

He closed his eyes, only to see the cursor, waiting for him. When Stacy finally hung up the phone, he was sitting in his chair, eyes closed, fast asleep.

"Poor guy," Stacy whispered to Larry and Stan as she shut her office door behind her. "He's obviously exhausted."

The bets on how long Joe would sleep varied from one-half hour to the rest of their shift. In the meantime, Stacy joined her staff in the lounge. "Give the guy a break," she said with a chuckle. She bet that the accountant would wake up within the hour, just to prove that she was part of the team.

In her office, the snapshots of her kids soon faded, and the cursor returned to the monitor, more insistent than ever just as fire alarms began to ring in earnest.

"Unfathomable depths," the sleeping accountant mumbled, unable to wake himself despite the ruckus, the flashing lights and blaring alarms.

"This is not a test," the voice over the intercom disrupted the daily hum of the office.

"This is not a test."

But of course, Joe knew, it always was. How deep. How many runs. How much it paid off. There would always be right answers and wrong. Winners and losers.

Larry and Theo joined the crowd of people fleeing down the building's stairwells. Acrid smoke began to fill the hallways. The alarms continued to ring, ear-bustingly loud, urgent. Computer screens throughout the building blinked, witness to it all, demanding final calculations, daring Joe to total the damages.

Joe saw only the cursor blinking waiting for his entry. He recalled that first moment of ecstasy. That fleeting moment of transcendence.

Marvelous, Stacy had said into the phone, as if she knew. He saw now that she had been trying to help him out. Perhaps she and the cursor were in cahoots.

No vain attempt, this. Nothing immeasurable. It could be calculated. Life could not be fathomless.

Joe sat down at his boss's desk. He rolled up his sleeves, polished his eyeglasses with a handkerchief. The cursor was there, waiting patiently for him. Forgiving him his lapses. He would get to the bottom this time. Nothing could stop him. The losers who had distracted him had all run away, the spineless cowards. Joe erased the trivial worksheets that had distracted him up, put the pointless wagers behind him. This time he would uncover the truth. Balance the biggest spreadsheet of them all. As he laid out the initial array, joy filled his heart, permeated the room, drowning out the alarms, the distant screams and the sirens approaching from afar.

One by one, the building's offices lost power. On reserve battery power or something even more resilient, the cursor watched Joe compute the final tally.

*Raised in Seattle and the Santa Clara Valley of California, **Kathryn Holzman** left the west coast of the US seeking adventure in the Big Apple where she met her husband at a poetry reading. After attending Stanford University and NYU, she chose Health Care Administration as a career, working with public inebriates, dentists, urologists, and cardiologists. When the right side of her brain rebelled against endless databases and balance sheets, she moved to New England with her husband, now a digital artist. Both flourish in the lush beauty of Vermont and the creative communities of Western Massachusetts. Her short fiction has appeared in over twenty online literary magazines and print anthologies. She is the author of a collection of short fiction, *FLATLANDERS*, Shire Press 2019. Her first novel *REAL ESTATE* is being published by Propertius Press in Fall, 2020. Links to her work can be found at [kathrynholzman.com](http://kathrynholzman.com).*