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Joshua Matthews

Dordt College, joshua.matthews@dordt.edu

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Wheel of Fortune

Josh Mathews

Years ago grandma watched Wheel of Fortune
every night. Out of duty I suffered
through that show with her, watching
Pat Sajak's smirk, Vanna White's skirt,
knowing the show was just
a glitzy game of hangman.
It seemed as if there was always some
poor schmuck named Sally, a secretary
with two dogs, who would lose
a turn every time.

One time Sally amassed six thousand bucks,
able to solve and cash out.
Yet she pressed on, buying
a "U" without needing to,
spinning one last time—
was she dumb or out of her mind?—
though the puzzle was clear to us all:

YOU BET YOUR
LI_E IS BUT A DREAM
(Category: Before and After)

As Sally spun, grandma and I looked
on as the wheel turned,
slowing slightly as it pinged each peg,
Sally cheering on. The wheel moved cruelly past vast sums,
but seemed to want to stop on a trip to Rome.
Slowing itself, fighting momentum, hesitating on Rome,
forcing, it seemed, the universe to pause, the wheel made all of us
hope. But
Sally had spun with too much force. The wheel
came to rest on black. There she stood, bankrupt.
"That's life," grandma said.

The Wheel of Fortune spins still
every night in America.
And still I watch Pat's smirk,
the phrases revealed by Vanna's skirts.
My age has doubled since
I last watched the wheel with grandma.
Today I saw it tempt
three more Sallies trying
to improve the lives of their dogs.
I solved every puzzle before Sally did, never
needing, like Sally, to buy a "U" or an "I."
I shouted at her for picking a "C"
when "F" was the obvious choice.
She lost, as always, never
understanding the odds, spinning too much.

After all these years why does the wheel spin still?
I think it enjoys tempting poor Sallies with trips
to Aruba or Spain, making two losers
out of every three of them.
Maybe that's what wheelwatchers like grandma
and I like so much, that unconscious thrill
of nightly assurance. But I think grandma believed, too,
and knew, as I have come to know, that hangman played
with a big wheel could never just be an idle game.
All of what's hidden behind
those white blank spaces,
the undiscovered phrases,
will always be revealed. It never fails.

"That's life," grandma would say.