

\$150.01.

Ka Wai Cheung, December 2023

Today, I made \$150.01.

This—the royalties I’ve earned from the third quarter of 2023 for a programming book I published nearly a dozen years ago. I am both surprised and disappointed by this amount.

Surprised. I can’t believe people are still buying this book—with actual money. In programming years, a 12 year old book is more a historical footnote than anything else. I have done nothing recently to deserve this amount of money. Passive income sometimes feels like cheating.

But disappointed too. What I’ve made is just one hundred fifty dollars and one cent. Enough for a good but not extraordinarily lavish meal for my family of four living in San Francisco. Barely enough for a day’s rent. I worked hard on that book for many many months pouring the knowledge of my craft accumulated in the many many years prior to that. This is it? One meal? One day protected from the rain?

I have a snapshot of a mundane memory. It is January 22nd, 1989 to be precise. I am opening up a small drawer—my drawer—in the middle of three stacked drawers on the right side of the big wooden desk in my parents’ bedroom. I have just meticulously cut around caricatures of Boomer Esiason and Joe Montana from the Sunday Chicago Tribune sports section. The starting quarterbacks would face each other later this afternoon in Super Bowl XXIII. I lay these cut cartoons on top of my pile of “interesting pieces of paper”. My beloved Chicago Bears had

lost two weeks earlier to the damned 49ers in the NFC Championship game and I am still in mourning. I've decided to keep these clippings as a reminder of how close I was to seeing the Bears there. (In truth, the game was not close). I am too young to realize maybe keeping sad reminders is not a good thing. But I also like drawing cartoons so these will come as handy reference items one day.

My drawer is where I keep my important affairs—for a 9 year old. Newspaper clippings, erasers, rulers, pencils, a compass. As I gently close the drawer, I see my life savings pass by: Three Washingtons, one Lincoln, and one Jackson spread neatly like a poker hand on the near-left corner of the drawer fade into the darkness. When you have but a few bills to your name, you keep those bills orderly and in a place you know you won't forget.

An additional \$150.01 that day would've more than quintupled my life-to-date savings. It would've certainly taken the sting away from not seeing my team in the Super Bowl that afternoon.

Today, I will give my 9-year-old self \$150.01 and make his day. It will make my day too.