

You Wish

I was browsing in an antiques shop when I found an old-fashioned oil lamp. It seemed to possess an aura of mystery, despite being battered and tarnished, and I was pretty sure a genie was trapped inside it. I'm prepared to accept that my judgement may have been affected by the whisky I'd drunk in the pub at lunchtime, and the weed I'd been smoking since breakfast, but I had a good feeling about the lamp. I tried to conceal my excitement as I took it over to the elderly man behind the counter at the back of the shop. Play it cool, I told myself.

The old man looked up from his book, and gazed at me over the glasses perched on the end of his richly veined nose.

'Do you want to buy that lamp?' he said.

It was clear that any attempt to deceive him would be futile. 'I'm thinking about it,' I said. 'How much do you want for it?'

'A hundred pounds.'

I stared at him. 'That seems very expensive,' I said, 'for a dirty old lamp.'

'That depends on how much it's worth.'

'To you, or to me?'

A grimace twisted his lips. 'It's no longer worth anything to me,' he said. 'But you might find it extremely valuable. You never know.'

A thrill ran through me. The lamp was *no longer* worth anything to him. Was he implying he'd exhausted its value – to him – by using up the three wishes to which the master of a genie is traditionally entitled?

'How about fifty quid?' I said.

'Ninety.'

Keeping my eyes fixed on his, I began to rub the lamp casually with the sleeve of my coat.

‘Stop!’ he hissed. ‘Don’t do that here.’ He glanced over his shoulder. There was a doorway behind him that was covered by a beaded curtain. The old man leaned forward. ‘Give me eighty-five pounds,’ he whispered, ‘and take it away.’

‘Sixty.’

‘Seventy-five.’

‘Done.’

‘Cash,’ he said.

Luckily, I had exactly seventy-five pounds in cash with me.

As soon as I’d locked the door behind me, and without taking off my coat, I sat at my kitchen table and began rubbing the lamp. After five minutes, I stopped rubbing and tried to ignore a sinking feeling in my stomach. Perhaps my intuition had been wrong. As I prepared myself for an onslaught of self-recrimination, my doorbell rang. I wasn’t expecting anyone. I draped a dishcloth over the lamp and went to the door.

The man was slightly out of breath, and I assumed he’d walked up the five flights of stairs to my flat in preference to taking the lift. I often did that myself, and it was probably the only real exercise I got, apart from flossing my teeth. But the man at my door looked reasonably fit. He was short and compact, with dark, curly hair that fell to his shoulders, and although he gave an impression of scruffiness, there was nothing particularly wrong with his clothes. His jeans were faded, but that could have been intentional. I estimated he was in his early thirties, probably a couple of years older than me. At a casual glance I would have said he was a courier, or a delivery driver, but he wasn’t carrying anything, and he made no attempt to explain his presence.

‘Hello?’ I said eventually.

‘It’s me,’ he said.

‘Who?’

‘The genie.’

I looked him up and down. ‘What do you mean?’

He sighed. ‘Have you just been rubbing the lamp?’

I nodded slowly.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘and here I am. My name’s George, by the way.’

‘I’m Ryan,’ I said.

‘I know.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I’m a genie, mate.’

I gripped the edge of the door and took a step back, ready to slam it shut if necessary, but there was nothing threatening about him. I didn’t know what to think.

He folded his arms in a way that seemed to say he wasn’t going anywhere.

‘Hold on,’ I said, ‘did the old man in the shop send you?’

He shook his head. ‘Nope. You summoned me, remember?’

‘But aren’t you meant to... like, come out of the lamp, or something?’

‘Come out of the lamp?’ There was a note of scorn in his voice. ‘Seriously? You mean like smoke, or some type of gas? Jesus. Are you high?’

‘No. Well, maybe a little bit.’

He snorted. ‘Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. But you’re not totally off your head, are you? And you’re not some kind of imbecile?’

‘No,’ I said coldly, ‘I am not an imbecile.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to be offensive. Because if you do in fact have mental health issues, I will be totally supportive of that.’

‘I don’t have mental health issues,’ I said. ‘I’ve been a bit depressed lately, but it’s not clinical depression, or anything like that. I’ve just been feeling low, I guess.’

‘Happens to the best of us, mate. Look, shall I come inside? I’d love a coffee. But if all you’ve got is instant, I’d prefer tea.’

‘No, I’ve got good coffee,’ I said. ‘I grind the beans myself, and use a stove-top percolator. It’s the closest you can get to a proper espresso without actually having a fancy espresso machine.’

‘Good man,’ he said.

I stood aside to let him in.

‘Damn fine cup of coffee,’ George said, replacing the cup in the saucer carefully.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

He looked me expectantly. ‘Recognise the reference?’

‘What reference?’

‘It’s what Agent Cooper says. “Damn fine cup of coffee.” In Twin Peaks.’

‘Oh, I see. I thought you were simply talking about the coffee.’

‘I was. I just thought I’d throw in the quotation for fun. Don’t get me wrong, great coffee. Really.’ He took a deep breath and slapped his palms down on his thighs. ‘So,’ he said, ‘what can I do for you? Your wish is my command. What’s your first wish? We can wait if you’re not ready, but it’s best not to overthink things, I find.’

‘Let me get this straight,’ I said. ‘I can ask you for anything I want?’

‘Anything. Three wishes. But don’t try to be clever, and say you wish for an infinite number of wishes, or any bullshit like that. That doesn’t work. Just tell me what you want, and I’ll get it for you.’

‘Money?’

‘If that’s what you want. Is it?’

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘I’ll have some money. Why not?’

He looked around. The kitchen was pretty large, and everything was in good condition. He’d probably noticed the designer furniture and the art in the living room on his way in. ‘You seem quite well off,’ he said, ‘Not that it’s any of my business.’

‘The fact is,’ I said, ‘all this – the flat and everything – comes from some money I made a few years ago. About four years. From a professional success.’

‘What profession was that?’

‘I’m a games developer. Well, I was. I haven’t come up with anything new recently, although I’m working on something. But it’s going to take more time, and the money’s running out. And to tell you the truth, I’m not really coming up with any new ideas. I wish I could find them, but I seem to be... stuck, for some reason.’ I looked down at the table. ‘I shouldn’t have let them buy me out.’

‘Who?’

‘I developed the game with a guy called Rick, and we hooked up with a big media company, and he went into partnership with them, and they paid me off. I could have stayed on board, but I wanted the money. I can’t complain. I got a big payday – enough to buy this place, and more. But Rick is earning ten times that amount every year, from each new version of the game they bring out. That’s just the way it goes, I suppose.’

‘So, how much do you want?’

‘I don’t want to be greedy. I just want enough to keep me going, and to develop this new thing I’m working on. Does that sound reasonable?’

George held up his hands. ‘Don’t ask me. I’ll get you whatever you ask for, but I won’t advise you. That’s not how this works.’

‘Didn’t you just advise me a minute ago? You told me not to overthink things.’

‘That wasn’t – no, look, you may have thought I was advising you, but I was just making an observation.’ He seemed annoyed.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘I want a hundred thousand pounds.’

He stood up. ‘Fine. How do you want it?’

I thought for a moment. ‘Gold.’

‘Okay, a hundred grand in gold, coming up.’ He shrugged himself into his coat.

‘Are you going out?’ I said.

‘Of course I am. How else am I going to get it?’

‘Oh. All right. How long will you be?’

‘About an hour. Maybe a bit less.’

‘Is it all right if I have a drink while I’m waiting?’

‘Do what you want, mate. I’m your genie, not your mum.’ He watched me take a bottle of whisky from the cupboard. ‘If that’s a single malt, save some for me, OK?’

I held up the bottle, which was more than half full. ‘No problem,’ I said.

He came back after about forty-five minutes. He strode past me and deposited a leather pouch on the kitchen table. ‘There you go,’ he said.

I noticed his left hand was bandaged with a strip of grubby looking cloth, and blood was seeping through it. ‘What happened to your hand?’ I said.

Ignoring my question, he loosened a drawstring around the pouch and tipped the contents onto the table. Two necklaces, a brooch, an ornate pendant on a chain, some earrings, and three watch straps.

‘Woah,’ I said, ‘where did you get that stuff?’

‘Never mind that. Have you got some disinfectant in the bathroom?’

‘In the cabinet,’ I said, ‘but just tell me, did you steal it? I can’t take it if it’s stolen. Apart from anything else, I could be nicked for receiving stolen goods.’

‘It’s not stolen. And if you want, I can take it out with me tomorrow and get cash for it, and put the money into your bank account.’ He gave me a sardonic smile. ‘As it happens, I could have done that in the first place. I could have sat here and done it all online, and it would have taken me three minutes. But you asked for gold.’

‘Then why didn’t you –’

‘What?!’ he said fiercely. ‘Advise you? What did I tell you about that?’

‘All right. But if it’s not stolen, where did it come from?’

He paused in the passageway to the bathroom. ‘Forget about it. And there had better be some of that whisky left when I come out.’

It was nearly midnight when the subject of my next wish came up, and we were both pretty drunk. We’d made inroads into another bottle of whisky.

‘I want a woman,’ I said.

‘All right.’ He pushed himself up from his chair.

‘How long will you be?’ I said. ‘Same as before?’

‘Less. Give me half an hour. Is this just a sex thing?’

‘Maybe,’ I said, ‘to begin with.’

‘What does that mean? You want to get married, or something?’

‘No, it means there’s nobody in my life right now, and I’d like to have sex with a woman. And if anything develops from there, that could also be nice.’

He nodded, and plucked his coat from the back of his chair.

The woman who arrived half an hour later was alone, which surprised me. I don’t really know what I’d expected, but the fruits of my first wish had been delivered by George in person, so I suppose I was anticipating it would happen again.

‘Hello,’ she said, ‘I’m Geraldine.’

She gave me a lovely smile, and I was flooded with desire. I sensed an instant bond between us. I took her coat, and ushered her into the living room. She sat on the couch and I sat beside her, but not too close. I wanted everything to be just right.

She looked around. 'This is a nice place.' Her voice was low and pleasant.

'Would you like a drink?' I said.

'That would be lovely.' She gave me that wonderful smile again as she leaned back against the cushions and crossed her arms. There was something oddly familiar about her. She reminded me of someone, but I couldn't think who it was. Then it came to me. She reminded me of George.

I peered at her, making no attempt to conceal my scrutiny. She raised an amused eyebrow. Her eyes were a colour between grey and blue – sea green, perhaps – and George's eyes were brown, and her hair was much lighter than George's, and she had fuller lips and wider cheeks. She didn't resemble him in any way, yet she reminded me of him more strongly with every passing moment.

I cleared my throat. 'Are you George's sister?'

She shook her head and smiled again. She reached out and took my hand gently in hers, and leaned towards me, her lips parted and her eyes wide. 'Is anything wrong?'

As I gazed into her eyes I knew, with absolute certainty, that somewhere behind them George was gazing back at me. I stood up. I couldn't go through with it. It wasn't a physical revulsion, or anything like that. I liked to think I was uninhibited sexually, and I'd experimented a bit over the years, and I was happy to sleep with anyone, of any sex or gender, if we were strongly attracted to each other. But this was something else.

'Sorry,' I said, 'this isn't going to work for me.'

She left without a word, although she paused in the doorway of the flat to turn and give me another dazzling smile, which almost broke my heart.

George returned about twenty minutes later. He didn't meet my gaze as he brushed past me on his way into the kitchen, where he sat down and poured himself a drink. I stood in the doorway until finally he looked up at me. 'What?'

'That was you, wasn't it?'

He drank half the whisky in his glass. 'I did my best,' he said.

I sat down and topped up my drink. 'I'm not complaining,' I said. 'She was the woman of my dreams, in many ways. It's just that I knew it was you, underneath it all.'

He slumped back in his chair. ‘What did you think, Ryan? That I’d go and find some poor bloody woman on the street, and drag her back here for your pleasure, like a pimp? Would you have preferred that?’

‘No, of course not. I just... I don’t know.’

He sighed. ‘Never mind. But that was your second wish, mate. Maybe we should leave the final one until tomorrow, when we’re both sober.’

‘Good idea.’

George drained his glass and stood up. ‘I’ll use the spare room, is that all right?’

‘The spare room?’

‘Yeah. Unless you want me to sit here all night on a kitchen chair, do you?’

‘I hadn’t thought about it, to be honest.’

‘No worries. I noticed the bed in there is made up. You can leave a towel out for me in the bathroom, if you like. Good night.’ He walked away unsteadily.

I woke up early with a brutal hangover. After two cups of coffee, I still felt terrible.

I heard the door of the spare room opening, then the sound of the shower. Five minutes later, George came into the kitchen. He poured himself a coffee and sat down.

‘How are you feeling?’ I said.

‘Fragile. Even a good whisky will give you a kicking if you drink as much as we did. How about you?’

‘I feel like shit. Look, can we forget about this whole thing? It doesn’t feel right, and I’d like to stop. I don’t care about getting my final wish. Nothing personal.’

He looked at me thoughtfully. ‘I don’t think we’re there yet.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I think you should use your imagination. Your wishes so far have been pretty conventional. Money and sex. Look, I’ll do whatever you want, but just take a moment to think about it, OK? Make sure you’re not missing something here.’

I leaned back and closed my eyes. My mind was a blank – and then it wasn’t. I sat forward and clutched the edge of the table. ‘Can you turn back time?’ I said.

He pursed his lips. 'Maybe. But you can't change what happens. You can't change a decision you made, or that anyone else made, or anything that would alter where you've ended up here and now, at this moment in your life.'

'I think I can stay within those parameters,' I said.

'OK, what's on your mind?'

I took a breath. 'I want to talk to my dad. I want to hear his voice one more time.'

'I'm assuming your father passed away?'

'Four years ago. He had a massive stroke. He was only sixty-five and although they'd told him he might be at risk, it was still totally unexpected. There were things I didn't get a chance to say.'

George took a phone out of his coat pocket and passed it to me. When I grasped it, he didn't let go of it. He fixed me with a serious look. 'Keep it together, mate.'

I nodded, and he released the phone. It seemed like a normal smartphone, but I didn't recognise the model. I keyed in my father's old land line number and held the phone to my ear. It was ringing. Then my father answered the phone.

'Hello Dad,' I said.

'Hello, Ryan. I thought it might be you.'

'Did you? Why?'

'I just had a feeling. Not that I'm exactly inundated with phone calls, so there was a fair chance it would be you. How are you doing?'

'I'm fine. Great. What about you, Dad?'

'Not too bad, thanks. They've just given me some new pills. Apparently my blood's too thick. I expect it's probably the consistency of old porridge. Anyway, these pills are supposed to make it thinner.'

'You'd better take them, then.'

From the corner of my eye I saw George raise a warning finger. I nodded and made a placatory gesture. I just wanted my dad's voice. 'How's the garden?' I said.

'It's looking good. That rose bush of your mother's is still going strong. She'd be pleased about that. If the weather holds, I'm going to get out there for an hour or two tomorrow. How about you? Everything all right?'

‘Actually, I’ve got some good news, Dad. You know that game I was developing with Rick?’

‘Of course. You’ve been talking about it for long enough.’

‘Well, I’ve finally made some money from it. A lot of money, actually. A big company has paid me for my share, and I’ve got enough to buy a flat and have plenty left over. I’m talking about a nice flat, too.’

There was a moment of silence, and then his voice sounded shaky. ‘Ryan, that’s wonderful news. I don’t know what to say. I know I’ve been a bit hard on you about it sometimes, but... good for you. Really. I’m proud of you.’

‘I can pay you back that loan.’

‘No need for that, son. I wasn’t expecting it back, to be honest.’

‘I know, but I’d like to.’

‘I don’t need it, but if you want to give it back, that’s fine. I’ll take you out for a stonking great curry.’

We both laughed.

‘Talking of food,’ my father said, ‘I’ve got a roast that needs taking out of the oven. I’d better go. I’m really pleased for you, Ryan. Lovely news. Talk again soon.’

‘Dad, I just want to say something. I love you.’

‘I love you too. You know that.’

‘Goodbye, Dad.’

‘Cheerio.’

I handed the phone back to George, then I folded my arms on the table in front of me, and laid my head down on them. I began to sob. After a couple of minutes, I felt a hand on my shoulder and I looked up. George placed a glass of water next to me, and the box of tissues from the spare room, then he walked out of the kitchen.

He came back fifteen minutes later. ‘All right?’ he said.

‘Fine, thanks. And thanks for making me think about it. You were right. So, what happens now? Do you just take the lamp and leave?’

He sat down. ‘It’s not quite that simple.’

‘Uh oh.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s just that you’ve got to pass the lamp on to someone.’

‘Can’t I take it back to the old guy in the shop?’

‘No. He won’t accept it.’

‘Well, there’s a charity shop on this street. How about if I take it in there?’

‘Fine, but you need to be sure someone takes possession. That’s important.’

‘What happens to you? Do you stay with the lamp?’

‘Sure. I’ve got a job to do.’

‘How long do you have to do this? Being a genie, I mean.’

‘A while longer. I’ve got some heavy karma to work off. OK, get going.’

I picked up the lamp and went into my bedroom.

‘I’ve got a few things to donate,’ I said to the woman behind the counter, and held up a plastic bag. It contained a cashmere sweater which I never wore, a waxed hat, and a few shirts. The lamp was nestled on top of the clothes. I placed the bag on the counter.

‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘that’s very kind.’ She glanced into the bag, then reached in and took out the lamp. She was about sixty, wearing a twinset and pearls that had probably been donated to the shop.

My plan had been to make sure the lamp was put on the shelves, and to stake out the shop somehow. It wasn’t much of a plan, admittedly. But as the woman gazed at the lamp, I saw an odd expression cross her face.

‘This is a funny old thing, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘It’s always nice to find interesting bric-a-brac.’ She gave me a bright, casual smile, but I noticed her knuckles were white where she was gripping the lamp. ‘I’ll pop it on the shelves in a minute,’ she said.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘There’s quite a good cashmere sweater in that bag too.’

She nodded tersely. Her smile was becoming brittle. I raised a hand in farewell and left, whistling tunelessly. I walked a few yards along the street, doubled back, and edged to the shop window. As I peered in, I saw the woman take a shoulder bag from beneath the counter, glance around, and drop the lamp into the bag.

The flat was empty when I got back. The bed in the spare room was made up, as if George had never been there at all. I began to feel sick. Then I saw the damp towel on the

bathroom floor. He'd left it there like a hotel guest complying with a housekeeping protocol. I picked it up and put it in the laundry basket, then I found myself walking into my studio. I realised I felt like working. As I sat down at my desk, I saw a post-it sticker on the corner of my computer screen with a message scrawled on it. I leaned forward and squinted at it until I deciphered the handwriting. It said, "*You wished you could have new ideas, right? Have this on me – G.*" I smiled, and fired up my kit.