

The Three Wishes
by
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The old man couldn't believe his luck. He pushed aside some crumpled newspapers and exposed the prize. Half a pizza, still in the box, and it couldn't have been in the dumpster for more than a day, two days tops. All his life, the old man had been pushed aside, forgotten about in crowds, or left behind. Soon, his anonymity became a way of life, subsisting on the discards of others and the indifference of all. He lived moment to moment, always had. Small affirmations, like half a pizza that still resembled a pizza and not a grade school science experiment, assured him, in his own odd way, that he did have luck in his life, after all.

The old man shoved the pizza, box and all, beneath his weather-worn coat. It was a heavy knee-length brown-tweed coat with faux-fur collar, the soils of many a sleep on the filthy city earth crushed into its fibers, never to come out. His chest length grey beard was easily equally soiled, making it hard to distinguish where facial hair ended and faux fur began.

With his dinner hidden safely away, the old man hurried out of the alley. He knew people of his lifestyle had been killed for carrying less. As a matter of fact, he knew it a little too well. He killed a man once, but no longer remembered why. He just knew, in his heart, it was for less than half an edible pizza. It was this memory, or lack thereof, etched in his character that made him walk another four blocks east before he would feel safe enough to bring out his food and eat.

It was in the last of these four extra blocks that the old man found the oil lamp.

The lamp was half pressed into the lawn of an industrial warehouse building, as if it had been stepped on or run over. But it wasn't damaged, at least not the part the old man could see. The old man looked up at the smoggy night sky and wondered if it had come from there.

He dug out the oil lamp with pre-soiled fingers. Besides some pressed on mud, the other half of the lamp looked to be in as good shape as the side that hadn't been pressed into the earth.

It was a rather spectacular lamp, now that the old man looked at it closer.

The shine was dulled from age, but there were beautiful, intricate, etchings in the metal, like the pictures the old man saw at an Ancient Egyptian museum display. He wondered if they told a story like the hieroglyphs of Egypt did.

He stood and held the lamp in the light of one of the few working street lights in the area.

There were several tiers of etchings, each tier following around the circumference of the lamp. Human figures and tiny writing were etched like comic strips into the metal of the oil lamp.

Curiosity, another of the old man's character traits, and a stronger one than his fear of death, got hold of him. He sat on the lawn beneath the streetlight, took out the pizza and ate with the same unwashed hands he used to dig out the lamp. Two slices on each other like a sandwich in his left hand, he fed his face while examining the lamp in his right hand.

He wiped the lamp on the lawn to clean off some of the earth covering the etchings on the side that had been buried. Not quite successful, he wiped it across his pants leg.

Still, it was hard to see the etchings.

He shoved the remainder of the pizza he was holding into his mouth and put both hands into action cleaning the lamp, holding it in one hand while, using part of his coat for the rag it was, he scrubbed with his other hand.

"If you keep rubbing it like that, it's going to catch on fire." a voice said from behind the old man.

It was a woman's voice and it was entirely unexpected.

The old man stood and spun around in the same movement, trodding upon the rest of his pizza.

"Where did you come from?" the old man asked, slipping the lamp into his pocket. There was no way she had come up the street, he would have seen her.

The building behind him was almost the entire block in length and what wasn't building was fenced in yard. There was no way she climbed over an eight foot chainlink fence with barbwire icing in the dress she was wearing.

It was a full length pink evening gown, tight against her slim body, without unnecessary frills. For a moment, the old man was entranced. It had been awhile since he had had a woman acknowledge his existence, much less speak words to him. Her presence softened his world for a brief time, then his survival instinct kicked back in and his body grew a bit more rigid.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you." the woman said, taking a step closer to the old man and reaching out her hand in a kindly non-threatening manner. "I've lost something and it's very important. If I can't find it, I'll be in real trouble." She looked up and down the lawn.

"What'd you think bringing something important way out here in the middle of nowhere?" the old man asked.

The woman looked at the old man with a slight scowl. "Are you going to help me find it or what?"

"My time is valuable." the old man said.

The woman looked at the old man, her scowl now a slight sneer. "Yes, I can see you are a man of great importance and expenditure." she said.

"Excuse me," the old man said, "but I believe you owe me for my pizza, since I stepped on it because of you."

"Help me find what I've lost and I'll give you enough to buy pizza until you're sick of pizza."

"That's a lot of pizza." the old man said. "I really like pizza."

"I'll take that into consideration. Do we have a deal?"

"You better not be lying about the reward." the old man said, pointing a finger at the woman.

"You'll have your reward. I promise you."

The old man looked at the woman.

The woman returned the stare.

The old man asked, "So, what'd you lose."

The woman smiled.

"A family heirloom." she said. "It's an old oil lamp. You know, like the kind genies come out of. It's been in my family forever. I just have to get it back."

The old man turned his attention to the ground. This reminded him of a joke he once heard about the difference between an alcoholic and a junkie. They'll both steal your wallet, but the junkie will help you look for it.

These circumstances, of course, were different. In this transaction, the old man was doing nothing more than conducting business.

"I'll tell you what," the woman said, "you look over there and I'll look over here."

"If you find it, do I still get the reward?"

The woman paused, then replied, "If I find it, I'll take you out for pizza. Does that sound okay?"

"Not as okay as if I find it." the old man said.

"Then you better get looking."

The woman walked away from the old man, who headed straight for some bushes that edged the building. Once at them, he looked to the woman, who had her back to him. He reached into his pocket, took out the lamp and placed it on the ground in the bush, pushing it into the dirt a bit. Then, he stood and called out to the woman.

"Hey," he shouted, "I think I found it!"

The woman turned to the old man.

"You think you found it?" she hollered.

"Well, unless someone else lost a shiny oil lamp around here."

The old man stooped and picked up the lamp from where he had just placed it.

By the time he stood, the woman was at his side.

"You did find it!" she said. Then, she did something the old man hadn't felt in a long time.

She hugged him.

"Wow, did I hire the right private investigator!" she continued, her excitement making the old man feel just a bit guilty for his facade.

"So, not to put a damper on the moment but, now that you have your lamp back, I hope you haven't forgot about the reward." the old man said.

The woman's smile didn't break. The old man took that as a good sign.

Instead, she pinched his cheek like his grandmother used to and said, "You're so cute. Of course I haven't forgotten about the reward."

The old man didn't know how to take this. Was she coming onto him? Was that to be his reward? Granted, it had been many many years since he had last been with a woman, and she was beautiful, albeit young, but beautiful, nonetheless. But, as enticing a fantasy as it was, the old man pushed the thought out of his head. One quickie does not buy much pizza, he concluded.

The old man saw a pair of headlights coming up the street, still four or five blocks away.

"If you could wish for anything in the world," the woman said, "what would it be?"

Again, the old man entertained a brief thought of an illicit rendezvous with this woman, right there on the moist lawn.

As the car came closer, the old man could see it was a white stretch limousine, at least an eight passenger model.

He wondered if this woman was a model, perhaps a supermodel. He turned his attention back to the woman.

"If I could have anything," he said, "I'd wish that car was coming for me."

The woman smiled. "I thought you'd say that." she said.

They both watched the car drive up and stop on the road in front of where they stood.

"Okay," the woman said, "what else would you wish for?"

"What is this?" the old man asked. "Some stupid game?"

"Oh, c'mon." the woman said. "Humor me."

The old man didn't think too long about his next response.

"I'd wish I was richer than anyone else in the world."

"Wow, you don't think small, do you." the woman said. "Let's have just one more wish. Anything you want. What would it be?" she asked, her face getting a slightly more serious look.

The driver door on the car opened and a man, dressed head to toe with full chauffeur regalia, including cap and sunglasses, though the sun was many hours

gone, got out and opened one of the side doors. Then, he stood beside the open door, like a soldier at ease.

"Jeez, another? Well, with all that I already have, I guess I'd wish I had a wish to give away."

"How truly noble." the woman said.

"But, nobility will not buy my pizza." the old man reminded the woman.

"No, you're right." the woman said.

Then, from a small handbag hanging at her waist, suspended from a small gold strap over her bare shoulder, she produced a black credit card and handed it to the old man. "But this will buy you lots of pizza."

The old man took the piece of black plastic. It didn't look like any credit card he had ever seen. "What's this?" he asked.

"That's your key to the banks." she said. "I'm sure you will find all the money you need in them."

The old man was bewildered. He looked to make sure the driver was still at the car and not about to knock him over the head and have him taken off to be the star of some snuff film where they get a couple of pretty woman to make out with a derelict like himself, then they kill him.

The driver was still at the car.

The old man turned his eyes back to the piece of plastic the woman handed him. "You're giving me a credit card?"

"Of course I am. What good to me is a credit card with your name on it?"

The old man looked at the card.

His name?

On the card?

He could see words written on it, but he didn't know what his name looked like written. He could barely remember what it was spoken.

"How did you get a card..."

"With your name on it?" the woman said, finishing the old man's sentence.

"In this day and age, it's a lot more convenient than handing over a sack of money."

The old man got defensive. "If this is a trick, so you don't have to pay me..."

The woman took a hundred dollar bill out of her handbag.

"Your life has changed in ways it will take a while for you to comprehend." the woman said. "But, rest assured, this is the beginning of your new reality."

She handed the hundred dollar bill to the old man.

"Go get yourself some pizza. The driver knows your favorite spot."

The old man turned to the car.

When he turned back to the woman, both she and the oil lamp were gone, leaving the old man standing there with a hundred dollar bill in one hand, a credit card in the other, and a stretch limousine waiting with a driver that knew his favorite buck-a-slice pizza joint.

He looked at the hundred dollar bill in his hand and thought, tonight, maybe he'd go somewhere else for supper, instead.

He turned and walked towards the car.

The driver straightened up a bit and smiled. "Good evening, sir." he said.

"Uh, good evening." the old man replied. He turned back to where he and the woman stood only moments before. She was as gone as she had been when he last turned to her, and there was no sign she would be returning anytime soon. "Do you work for that woman? I'm sorry, I never got her name?" the old man asked the driver.

"What woman, sir?" the driver asked.

"The woman I was standing with only moments ago."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I didn't see a woman."

"How could you have missed her? She was dressed in a long pink dress."

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm sure she was quite beautiful to have you so flustered, but I didn't see her."

The old man didn't say anything for a moment.

"Who pays you?" the old man asked the driver.

"Why, you do, sir." the driver responded, a somewhat puzzled look on his face.

The old man's face had an equally puzzled look on it, though it was buried beneath his soiled beard.

"And you say you didn't see me with a woman."

"No, sir, I did not see a woman."

"No, of course you didn't." the old man said, his sight turning from the driver back to the spot where she had stood, back to the trampled pizza slices and box on the lawn, then down to his own shoddy attire and broken shoes. "Of course you didn't. Please excuse me, I'm just a bit tired at the moment"

The driver smiled his understanding.

The old man then entered his limousine for the first time, and the door closed on his past.

At first, his attention was all over the extravagant interior of the car.

With more leather seats than he had friends to fill, a bar, television, and two cellular phones, this car was a rolling entertainment unit. His eyes wandered about, but soon he drew their attention back to his hands and the contents thereof.

"Where would you like to go, sir?" the driver, segregated from the passenger section with a black window, asked over a small speaker.

There was a red button next to the speaker, and the old man pressed it, then spoke. "Let's go get some food." he said, looking at the hundred dollar bill he held in the hand pressing the intercom button.

"Then," he added, looking at the credit card in the hand reaching for an airline-size bottle of vodka from the bar, "let's find a barber and a tailor. I've got some sprucing up to do."

"Yes, sir." the driver said, and pulled the car away from the curb.

As the driver turned the car around and pointed it towards the city's innards, a childhood giddiness overwhelmed the old man and he burst into laughter. If this was a dream, he hoped he didn't have to wake up. As he laughed and wailed, tears of joy filled his eyes and clouded his vision. Had it not been for that, he would have had one last glimpse of the beautiful woman in the pink dress, as she flew off into the distant night sky, riding a hand-woven carpet.

The old man woke the next morning with the hangover to end all hangovers.

The pain in his head was soon forgotten as his crust-filled eyes opened and saw the blue silk slip covering the pillow his head lay on. He sat up quick, far too quick for someone in his condition, and nausea crept up his throat.

He choked back the feeling and gazed upon the bed he was in. Larger than any bed he had ever seen on display in any department store, there was enough mattress surrounding him to comfortably sleep as many bums as it would take to fill the seats in the limousine.

The old man couldn't believe his own thoughts.

His limousine.

His bed.

His room in what he imagined to be his house. These were his silk pajamas he was wearing, his silk sheets he'd been sleeping on.

The old man turned his gaze to the ceiling, some thirteen feet up from where he sat, and thanked God for the first time in his life.

There was a painting on the ceiling. Rather, a series of paintings, all somehow connected. The old man tried to focus his hurting eyes on the paintings but, in trying so hard, he brought on a dizzy spell and the nausea came back with a vengeance.

The old man hurriedly got out of bed and headed for the open door at the other side of the room. He had hoped it was a bathroom, and his hope wasn't crushed. Across the threshold, he dropped to his knees and proceeded to vomit into the most beautiful toilet he had ever seen.

It was then he realized his beard was gone.

With a rush of adrenaline the like of which he hadn't felt since having to outrun a triplet of pitbull terriers that had really, really wanted to sink their teeth

into his stinking flesh, he jumped up from the the floor and stood his aching body in front of the bathroom sink. Surprisingly, the mirror was of average size in such an otherwise proportionately obscene bathroom.

The old man looked in the mirror, then quickly turned his head in disbelief. Still looking away, he raised his hand to his chin and felt naked flesh.

A shudder ran up his spine and he cringed at being so naked, so vulnerable. His face. They could see his face. Everyone. Anyone that looked.

He put his face in his hands, his naked palms against his naked face, and drew them apart again with such a start that he smacked the back of his head on the sink, doing his hangover no good, whatsoever.

When the stars cleared, he looked at his hands like a high school kid on acid, seeing them for the very first time all over again.

These weren't his hands.

The palms, they were soft.

There were no liver spots, no scars.

And his fingernails. Not even the best manicurist could have done that good a job to his fingernails overnight. They were perfect. Not a hangnail, not a chip. Not a fleck of dirt beneath them. Yesterday, traces of diseases long believed extinct could have been sampled from beneath his fingernails. This morning, they were impeccable.

Something very odd happened to him when he stepped into that car, the old man began to suspect. Maybe the woman and the driver were in cahoots after all, and the booze was spiked. Maybe they switched his brain with someone else. Not that that in itself would have been such a bad thing, considering the choice he got switched with. After all, with exception to the hangover, this had turned out to be the best day the old man had ever woken up to.

He put himself in front of the mirror once more but, again, he threw himself away from the mirror in horror. There was no lobotomy scar beneath the brown hair that covered his forehead but, yesterday, there was no hair to cover his forehead, brown or any other color.

He turned back to his reflection. There were still wrinkles on his face, but no where near the cavernous etchings time had carved into his face when he has last looked in a mirror. And he imagined the wrinkles he had then would have only grown deeper, not smoothed themselves out a bit. Perhaps the beard he had worn for almost two decades had pulled his skin more wrinkled than nature would have otherwise. Maybe having it shaved off in his drunken stupor released the tension and his face sprung back into shape. However, that didn't explain the hair on his head, or the youthful body he now realized he was wearing.

He pulled open the pajama top in such a hurry that two buttons popped off and landed in the sink. He had never had as much hair on his chest as he did at that

moment, and he had never had such well developed pectorals. This was the body of a man twenty years younger than he had been twenty four hours earlier.

He was about to drop his drawers and see what other gifts had been endowed upon him when he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a new light.

He stopped thinking of his body and turned back to his face. It had been many many years since he had seen himself without a beard, but he recognized the face in the mirror as though he had seen it every day. And it most certainly had never been his own.

"I don't believe this." he said, reaching out his hand and touching the face in the mirror.

"I'm you. You're me." he said, his smile growing larger with each realization and affirmation.

He saw a pair of prescription glasses on the sink counter. He picked them up, put them on, and saw the new him clearly for the first time, trademark windows to the world and all.

"I really am the richest person on this stinking planet." he said.

"I really, really am!"

Then, hysterical laughter came over him and he didn't say anything else for a few minutes.

Once he regained his composure, he quickly threw on the clothes closest to him and headed into the house to find the door out. It was a nice place, he thought, but not where he wanted to be on his first day of untold riches.

How much was he worth, he wondered, as he headed down a spiraling staircase made of marble with a wrought iron banister. There was a definite edge to the house's decor, but he knew he had plenty of time to bask in it later, when he was tired.

"Good morning, sir." a petite woman in a traditional maid uniform said, greeting him at the bottom of the staircase.

"Uh, good morning." he said, shooting his gaze all over the room.

Not knowing the maid from Eve, he took the look on her face to mean he was acting a little odd. Was he acting a bit too excited? Was he not supposed to say "good morning"? Perhaps it was the "uh". Yes, that had to be it. People in his life's position didn't have time to say "uh", they just said what had to be said, then moved on.

"Will you be eating this morning?" the maid asked.

He just about "uh"ed, but caught himself and paused instead.

"No, I'll be going out immediately and won't be back all day." he said.

"Could you please have my car sent around."

The maid looked positively baffled.

She "uh"ed, then said, "Are you alright, sir? You look a little pale."

"Yes, I'm fine. I just want to go for a drive, that's all. I just need some quality me time."

The maid seemed a little more relaxed after that was said.

"Okay, have yourself a nice day." she said, opening the front door. Outside, there was a red sportscar that he didn't even know the make of.

"That's my car, isn't it." he said to the maid, masking the question he was actually asking.

"Yes." she said. "That is your car."

They both looked at it.

"I always park it there, don't I."

"Only when you're here."

"And the keys?" he asked, this time not masking the fact.

"Where they always are, I'd imagine." the maid said, her relaxed look now growing a little agitated. "You really tied one on last night, didn't you?" she asked, looking hard at his face. "I'll ask you again, is everything alright?"

She put her hand on his arm, and he turned towards her.

"Things have never been better." he said, stepping slightly back and distancing himself from her touch. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm the richest man in the world and I want to go for a drive. Don't you have something to dust?"

The maid looked as though she had been slapped in the face. Her mouth tensed and her eyes narrowed. "Uh, yes, sir. Yes, of course I have things to do." she said, shaking her head and disappearing into a room he didn't even know the purpose of.

"Quit saying uh." he muttered as he walked to his shiny red sportscar. "It makes you sound stupid."

The keys were already in the ignition. With the security he saw walking around, while making sure they were keeping a healthy distance from his own personal space, he had guessed that in the ignition was where he would always have left the keys. He reached into his pocket to make sure he had his key to the banks, his black card, with him. It was one piece of plastic he was sure he would never leave home without. In his pocket it was.

He sat in the car and it was a glove to his body. He turned the ignition.

The car roared to life, then settled to a purr. He flipped down the sun visor to shade his eyes, and something fell into his lap.

It was another black credit card, identical in design to the one he had in his pocket.

He laughed and opened the glove compartment to toss it in.

Black plastic cards spilled out onto the passenger side floor, dozens of them.

He couldn't believe his eyes. It was like gold bars falling off the back of a truck, although he guessed the dollar to weight ratio was much greater on his black

cards. How much proof did one man need that he was wealthy beyond all possibilities of ever being poor, he wondered as he picked up the cards, returning them to the compartment.

He threw the car into gear and took off far too quickly for someone that hadn't driven in over two decades. Fortunately, the driveway ahead of him was straight and long. Lined with hedges, a sidewalk crossed it at its end, an end that came a moment too soon. The car stopped as soon as it was asked to, but it wasn't asked to until it had already knocked a pedestrian to the ground.

He stopped the car and jumped out.

Splayed out on the lawn was a derelict in ratty clothing. The derelict had a long grey beard not unlike the one he, himself, had sported only hours ago. He dropped to his knees beside his fallen comrade, another of the forgotten, the unwashed. There, but for the grace of God, was himself. His own filth only hours behind him, he found the pungent aroma of the derelict to be overwhelming. He put his hand beneath the derelict's beard and felt for a pulse. There was one, it was a faint one, but a pulse, nonetheless.

The derelict coughed, a bubble of blood grew and popped out of one of his nostrils. He opened one of his eyes.

"Help me." the derelict said.

"Of course." he said, rising quickly, wiping the tear from his eye. He leaned into his car and looked for a phone. While there were two in the limousine, he didn't see one in his own car.

"Dammit." he said. Where were all the security people now, he wondered. He honked the horn for a couple of seconds to try to get some security attention, then stopped, thinking of the broken man laying on the grass in front of the car, right where the horn blared.

He hurried back to the derelict's side.

"Look, I live in that huge house way back there down this driveway. I'm just going to hop in my car and head..."

The derelict lurched violently and retched a puddle of blood and bile.

"Oh no, hang on. I'm going to get you help. Damn, I wish I knew first aid." he said. Then, the light went on in his head, and he remembered what he did have.

He had a third wish, a wish to make someone else's wish come true.

"If you can still hear me," he said, "I can make you better right now, you just have to wish for it. That's all you have to do. Do you hear me? I can make your wish come true. You just have to wish for it, and you'll be as healthy as you've ever been. Just wish."

The derelict mumbled, too quiet for him to hear.

He leaned his ear close to the derelict's bleeding mouth. "Just wish for it." he said.

The derelict mumbled again, and he heard clearly what the derelict used his dying breath to wish for.

The security was upon the scene immediately thereafter. Their first assumption, from the look of sheer terror on their boss' face, was that he was in danger. When he laid the derelict's hand on the grass and stood, the security guards all breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief.

"Are you alright, sir?" one of them asked.

"Uh, I do believe I've just killed a man." he said.

"It was an accident." one of the guards said. "Those people jump in front of cars all the time, to get insurance claims and stuff. This one just didn't fall right. Don't worry about this. We'll take care of it." the guard said, looking around and getting the nod of approval from the rest of the security.

"Uh, fine." the billionaire said. "Just see to it he gets a decent burial, would you? He seemed like he may have been a good person."

"Did he have any last words?" a guard asked.

"Yes, he did." the billionaire said, wiping a tear from his eye. "He said he wished he was me."

"Ya, him and everyone else." the guard said with a chuckle.

The billionaire turned his back to the chuckling guards.

He started walking towards the house, his house, his smile growing larger with each step. The first thing he was going to do was eat until he could eat no more. Then, he was going to sleep until he could sleep no more. He hoped the bed was a big one.

He couldn't imagine it would be anything less.

The End

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