

“A Calendar of Tales” by Neil Gaiman

October

That feels good,” I said, and I stretched my neck to get out the last of the cramp.

It didn’t just feel good, it felt great, actually. I’d been squashed up inside that lamp for so long. You start to think that nobody’s ever going to rub it again.

“You’re a genie,” said the young lady with the polishing-cloth in her hand. “I am. You’re a smart girl, toots. What gave me away?”

“The appearing in a puff of smoke,” she said. “And you look like a genie. You’ve got the turban and the pointy shoes.

I folded my arms and blinked. Now I was wearing blue jeans, grey sneakers, and a faded grey sweater: the male uniform of this time and this place. I raised a hand to my forehead, and I bowed deeply.

“I am the genie of the lamp,” I told her. “Rejoice, O fortunate one. I have it in my power to grant you three wishes. And don’t try the ‘I wish for more wishes’ thing – I won’t play and you’ll lose a wish. Right. Go for it.”

I folded my arms again.

“No,” she said. “I mean thanks and all that, but it’s fine. I’m good.”

“Honey,” I said. “Toots. Sweetie. Perhaps you misheard me. I’m a genie. And the three wishes? We’re talking anything you want. You ever dreamed of flying? I can give you wings. You want to be wealthy, richer than Croesus? You want power? Just say it. Three wishes. Whatever you want.”

“Like I said,” she said, “Thanks. I’m fine. Would you like something to drink? You

must be parched after spending so much time in that lamp. Wine? Water? Tea?”

“Uh...” Actually, now she came to mention it, I was thirsty. “Do you have any mint tea?”

She made me some mint tea in a teapot that was almost a twin to the lamp in which I’d spent the greater part of the last thousand years.

“Thank you for the tea.”

“No problem.”

“But I don’t get it. Everyone I’ve ever met, they start asking for things. A fancy house. A harem of gorgeous women – not that you’d want that, of course...”

“I might,” she said. “You can’t just make assumptions about people. Oh, and don’t call me toots, or sweetie or any of those things. My name’s Hazel.”

“Ah!” I understood. “You want a beautiful woman then? My apologies. You have but to wish.” I folded my arms.

“No,” she said. “I’m good. No wishes. How’s the tea?”

I told her that the mint tea was the finest I had ever tasted.

She asked me when I had started feeling a need to grant people’s wishes, and whether I felt a desperate need to please. She asked about my mother, and I told her that she could not judge me as she would judge mortals, for I was a djinn, powerful and wise, magical and mysterious.

She asked me if I liked hummus, and when I said that I did, she toasted a pita bread, and sliced it up, for me to dip into the hummus.

I dipped my bread slices into the hummus, and ate it with delight. The hummus gave me an idea.

“Just make a wish,” I said, helpfully, “and I could have a meal fit for a sultan brought in to you. Each dish would be finer than the one before, and all served upon golden plates. And you could keep the plates afterwards.”

“It’s good,” she said, with a smile. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

We walked together through the town. It felt good to stretch my legs after so many years in the lamp. We wound up in a public park, sitting on a bench by a lake. It was warm, but gusty, and the autumn leaves fell in flurries each time the wind blew.

I told Hazel about my youth as a djinn, of how we used to eavesdrop on the angels and how they would throw comets at us if they spied us listening. I told her of the bad days of the djinn-wars, and how King Suleiman had imprisoned us inside hollow objects: bottles, lamps, clay pots, that kind of thing.

She told me of her parents, who were both killed in the same plane crash, and who had left her the house. She told me of her job, illustrating children’s books, a job she had backed into, accidentally, at the point she realised she would never be a really competent medical illustrator, and of how happy she became whenever she was sent a new book to illustrate. She told me she taught life drawing to adults at the local community college one evening a week.

I saw no obvious flaw in her life, no hole that she could fill by wishing, save one.

“Your life is good,” I told her. “But you have no one to share it with. Wish, and I will bring you the perfect man. Or woman. A film star. A rich... person...”

“No need. I’m good,” she said.

We walked back to her house, past houses dressed for Hallowe’en.

“This is not right,” I told her. “People always want things.”

“Not me. I’ve got everything I need.”

“Then what do I do?”

She thought for a moment. Then she pointed at her front yard. “Can you rake the leaves?”

“Is that your wish?”

“Nope. Just something you could do while I’m getting our dinner ready.”

I raked the leaves into a heap by the hedge, to stop the wind from blowing it apart. After dinner, I washed up the dishes. I spent the night in Hazel’s spare bedroom.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want help. She let me help. I ran errands for her, picked up art supplies and groceries. On days she had been painting for a long time, she let me rub her neck and shoulders. I have good, firm hands.

Shortly before Thanksgiving I moved out of the spare bedroom, across the hall, into the main bedroom, and Hazel’s bed.

I watched her face this morning as she slept. I stared at the shapes her lips make when she sleeps. The creeping sunlight touched her face, and she opened her eyes and stared at me, and she smiled.

“You know what I never asked,” she said. “Is what about you? What would you wish for if I asked what your three wishes were?”

I thought about it for a moment. I put my arm around her, and she snuggled her head into my shoulder.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “I’m good.”

- *October Tale* -