

HIS WISH

This is a true story.

In the winter of 1988, when I was 25 years old, I guess I was what you would call a dreamer. I was a young man, unsure of himself, unsure of his place in the world. I was “trying to become a writer...” as I put it. What is for sure is that I was struggling just to survive.

The only job at this time that I felt confident in my ability to do was Newspaper Delivery. Consequently, I was a 25 year old paper boy...

Now, to most young men of my age this would probably be embarrassing. To my thinking though, it was PERFECT. “It leaves my days free to write!” I explained to my concerned parents, never suspecting that this probably didn’t impress them nearly as much as it did me...

I lived in Akron Ohio.

I was born and raised in Akron, but that was in the suburbs. The inner city was my home now.

And...in the winter of 1988, the North Pole decided to blow its frosty breath upon Lake Erie...she In turn gave birth to ICE...and for six straight weeks the temperature in Akron did not top 10 degrees...

At exactly 2 am, on the night of February 23rd, 1988, with a severe winter storm warning in effect, I was in my one room efficiency getting ready to go do my paper route. I turned down the stove I used for heat, propped my mattress against the wall, and proceeded to put on the 3 layers of thermals I knew I would need for the job.

I went outside to brush the snow off my white ‘74 impala. The digital clock across the street said that it was 5 degrees below zero. I got in my icy car and set out for adventure.

Upon arriving at my pick up corner, I saw that at least half of my papers had blown away. Up and down the street as far as the eye could see, every well manicured yard and porch in this suburban neighborhood was thoroughly decorated. So, conscientious business man that I am, I decided I would just deliver to my “good customers,”... and

screw the rest. As a result I was finished early, and at 4:30 am was already making my way home on desolate E. Market St. The promised storm had arrived, and the glare cast by my headlights allowed me to see maybe 10 yards in front of me, no more. 10 yards of billowing ice and snow.

On a whim that maybe if I used my brights it would help, I flashed them on for a split second. No sooner had I done this, however, than I realized I had seen something out there... actually, I hadn't "seen" it, but a negative image had developed on my retinas when I turned my brights off. I flashed them again. Sure enough, two lone figures, like frozen wraiths, were captured in the icy glow. I could just barely see them in the high beam's glare - two ghosts, standing in the pitch black parking lot of a boarded up gas station, far back from the street.

Lightly tapping my brakes, I managed to slide into the lot. The "ghosts," for that is what I was sure they were, *were just standing there*, motionless in front of what looked like an impossibly long black car. Its hood was up, and the "ghosts" were - not looking, but I would say rather gazing - into the black hole it created. They stood at least 3 feet back from the engine.

I pulled in behind them.

"Hi! Having car trouble?"

Two women, probably about 30 years old, so bone thin that at first I thought they were much older.

"Umm, Hello? are you guys OK?"

I asked this second question, because they had not seemed to hear the first. I got out of my car and walked over to them. They were attired almost identically - bell bottom jeans, leather clogs without socks, thin hoody jackets that were too small for them and left exposed their gaunt ribs. And they just STOOD there, hollow eyed and pale, hugging themselves in a shivering embrace.

"The car won't start..." they said in unison.

There was a strange, dreamlike quality to their voices, and this, combined with the way neither of them had yet made eye contact with me, left me still wondering if they even knew I was there. I walked over and peered into the dark void with them. Snow had completely covered the engine.

“Hmmm, can’t off hand see what’s wrong with it,” I said, letting the irony be, “maybe you guys should let me drive you home. Do you live close to here?”

This question seemed to suddenly bring them to life. They began to give me descriptions of their home, explanations of their home, reasons it *was* their home - everything but directions to their home. As I was beginning to get pretty cold at that point, I decided to slowly “escort” them in the direction of my car, and finally succeeded in getting them in.

In the car, they continued talking. I learned that their names were Dixie and Carla. Dixie was the taller girl. She was reddish colored, though I don’t know how long she had been standing in the cold. Her fuzzy auburn hair was piled up over her eyes and down her back. She said her friend’s name was Carla. In my rearview mirror I could barely make out the small black haired girl shivering in my backseat.

“How long were you guys out there?” I asked. This launched them into a strange sort of whining, accusatory argument, where both sides seemed afraid to hurt the other’s feelings for fear of reprisal. They kept repeating things like “no sir, Dixie” and “yes sir, Carla, it’s not true you know it’s not.” It was only by way of sudden revelation that I managed to find their home.

“Turn here!”

I slammed on the brakes too fast and slid sideways into a crater strewn driveway. The house it belonged to was a large run down old brown stone, typical of the houses in this part of East Akron. It, and one or two other points of light, was all that remained amidst the boarded up condemnations on this dark subterranean street.

“We live here.”

The girls jumped out before I had even brought my car to a complete stop, and walked straight into the house, closing the metal door behind them. I got out of my car, and walked carefully up the stone steps to the porch. I was sure I had heard voices within, but when I knocked, the voices suddenly stopped. I knocked again. After about half a minute the door slowly opened.

Carla, the small dark haired girl, greeted me like I had just arrived late and a festive party was underway.

“Hi! Come on in! I’m Carla! I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name...” The dreamy sound was still there.

“Hi,” I said, “I’m Pat, the guy who drove you home...”

“Hi!” she said again, “Come on in!” She turned and walked away.

A brightly lit room. Rectangular, opening to my left. It had a low plaster ceiling, green painted walls, and smoke-stained blinds pulled all the way down. A floor of dark wood boards. Against the wall opposite me stood a decrepit blue velvet couch, with a coffee table and red cushion arm chair next to it. Two folding metal chairs against the wall opposite them completed the furnishings.

I looked for Carla, but she had already retreated to the far corner of the room. She was now seated on one of the metal chairs, her back to me, totally absorbed into a small black-and-white TV.

I didn’t bother kicking the snow off my boots, because puddles of melting slush already covered the floor anyways. And I didn’t bother taking off my coat either, because it was cold in the house and there honestly didn’t seem to be any reason to. I trudged over to the couch and sat down.

Across from me on one of the metal chairs sat a young man with black stringy hair and thin patches of beard on his cheeks. He was wearing greasy black pants, old tennis shoes, and a blue vinyl winter jacket with fake fur zipped up to his chin. He sat ramrod straight against the wall, hollow eyed and nervous.

Seated to my right on the couch was Dixie. I was about to say hi to her, when suddenly an old black man, who I guessed to be about 65, came into the room from the kitchen. He was smallish, perhaps 5 foot 5, and attired from head to toe in full military dress uniform, complete with insignia and metals. On his feet were shiny black army boots. He sat down on the couch next to me. But no sooner had he sat down, than he stood up again and walked ceremoniously to the middle of the floor.

“Good evening Dixie, Good evening Carla, lovely to see you this evening. I know you’ve been

mainlining something. Go on and tell me it's not true."

I clearly heard what he said, but I wasn't sure if what I heard was what he really meant. Dixie and Carla began to protest in the same whining pleading way as they had when they argued with each other in my car.

"Well just tell everyone, why don't you. We have not. It's not true. You didn't have to just go and tell everybody."

The old general made a profane noise and walked over to the door. Dixie turned to me and said, "I'm not saved, sir. But I really hope that someday I will be. Carla's not saved either."

"Oh Dixie, you can't say it's my fault if it just ran out of gas. You just can't."

Dixie leaned over and whispered into my ear "she's the one."

I tried to think of something religious to say. I racked my brain to come up with something fitting, but in the end all I managed was "God bless you."

The general stepped in a puddle and said SHIT.

Dixie leaned over and touched Carla's hand. Simultaneously they stood and walked through a sliding wood door I hadn't noticed in the far wall, gently closing it behind them. I could hear soft voices talking on the other side, but how many I couldn't tell.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

"In the other room," said the General.

I decided it was time to make myself sound appealing.

"I'm going to help you guys get that car started again."

"Mmm hmm."

"It might be the battery, in the morning I'll go take a look..."

"You're religious are you?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Harold turn up the TV will you please."

I don't know how long I sat there, but I'm sure it was an hour or more. The Jackie Gleason show was on when I arrived. It ended and Company C came on, which was then followed by Dobie Gillis.

Meanwhile, the General had reseated himself as far from me as possible.

Finally, I summoned all my courage. “What are the girls doing in there?”

“Why don’t you go in and see for yourself?”

I turned to look at the old man, but he was staring intently at the television. Did he really say I should go in?

I stood up and walked past him across the wet floor.

“Don’t go in there.”

I turned immediately at the sound of his voice, but he was still staring at the television, as if he hadn’t uttered a word. I turned to Harold. A look of amazement and terror branded his sallow features.

The sliding door looked like it was original to the house. It was made of old dark oak, intricately carved with ornate designs. It was opened about an inch, and the crack of light that emerged made a stripe down the center of my face and split my chest in half.

I reached out my right hand and touched the door. It slid open as if on cue, and my eyes were instantly met by a room unlike any I had ever seen.

It was immense, at least twice the size of the room I was just in. It was rustic in appearance, and had a high wooden ceiling with thick beams running horizontally across it. From these hung long brightly colored silk banners - like tapestries in a medieval castle. Three lamps in the corners cast an incandescent glow that was absorbed and reflected by the banners, in such a way as to create a rainbow effect - a halo of color - that totally encompassed the room.

As my eyes slowly adjusted, the first thing I saw was that under the banners was what appeared to be a bed. It was huge, larger than king size, mounted on a wooden platform that emerged from the middle of the floor. Dixie and Carla were seated on the edge of it. They seemed to be busy with something. Something in the center. They were speaking to it. I looked, but could not understand what I saw.

For it is a young man. But he must be a dwarf. He’s standing straight up in the center of the bed, yet he is only 2 feet tall. He has long jet black hair that

falls all the way down his back and ends at the bottom of his body. On top it's short and spiked.

And then I understand. He has no legs. He is propped up and held in place in the center of the bed by a circle of quilts that form a sort of pedestal in which his body has been set. Dixie holds a strap on his naked arm, into which a needle is thrust.

I turn and start to leave.

"No, that's OK, you can stay." It is a soft voice, unlike any I've ever heard.

"I'm sorry," I say, turning back around. The strap and the needle are already gone, concealed, I assume, in the bag beside Dixie.

"No, no, that's OK, I'm the one who should be sorry, keeping you waiting outside so long. It's just that Carla wanted to read us a new poem she wrote." Carla is now sitting on the corner of the bed, looking down into a book under the lamp.

He talks very softly, but his voice is clear and I have no problem hearing him. His face is thin, unlined, with large blue eyes.

"OK, thanks Dixie and Carla, now if you wouldn't mind, please go wait in the other room for a minute if that's ok."

He says this, not like he's giving a command, just asking a favor. He tries to readjust his body in the quilts, and is immediately wracked by coughs, but they are quiet coughs, like those of a newborn. His wirelike body caves in though, and it takes him a few moments before he is able to recover enough to continue speaking.

"I want to thank you for helping Dixie and Carla," he finally says. The calm in his voice, after such a spasm of coughing, startles me.

I tell him that it is OK.

We are both silent for a short moment.

"Do you think there's something wrong with the car?" He smiles when he asks it, and looks down.

I'm not sure if I replied. Perhaps I just shrugged my shoulders. If the mind cannot decide between a dream and what is real, it sometimes finds itself lost in sensory musings. I drifted through the silk banners, confronting their shadowy contours, their colorful illusions. Floating, I become aware of music. It's coming from the clock radio on the

bedside table. It's SUNSHINE, a song I haven't heard for a long time, and the familiarity is welcome.

IF I HAD A SONG THAT I COULD SING
FOR YOU...

"I have been friends with Dixie and Carla since we were little children, when we were in kindergarten together. When I first became sick, in high school, they started taking care of me in this house, which Dixie's mother owned at the time."

His voice is still so soft, and yet somehow I can hear it clearly...

"At first they would bring me my homework every day after school, but all we ever did was sit here and write poems and play cards," he smiles. "So pretty soon they dropped out of high school. I asked them not to, but they said they had to take care of me, that was more important. When Dixie's mother died she left us this house."

He becomes silent for a moment, and looks down. Then he looks at me again.

"I want to thank you for helping them tonight. They're very special to me, and I appreciate it."

Only then did I notice. Contained in his deep eyes, a question lived. A burning question, but one that seemed nevertheless full of resignation. The question seemed focused on me, but I had no idea what it was. I start to shake my head as if to say "I don't know," but stop.

"Why don't you go and try the car again, maybe this time it will start."

I looked at him for a moment longer than would be normal when he said this. He looked back at me, his deep eyes peaceful and calm. I hear myself say ok. I turn around and go out, closing the door behind me.

"Let's go try the car again, Dixie and Carla."

"See, I told you Dixie, I told you it would be OK."

The General was sitting close to the television now, his chin resting in his hand. Harold watched him with wide, frightened eyes.

Dixie and Carla immediately walked outside and climbed into my car.

I was about to follow, when suddenly the old man sprang up. He charged across the room straight at me. I was sure he was about to hit me, so I raised my hands in defense. Instead, he came between me and the door.

“They want to die with him, do you understand that, Mr. Religion? They want to die with him, but he has made the request that I do whatever I have to in order to make sure that that don’t happen. Those girls stay alive! Do you understand this?”

I nodded my head.

“I am here tonight to help him, now he feels his hour’s come. It’s His Wish, do you understand that?”

Out in the cold pre-dawn air, there were no stars, though the storm had ended.

From the car, Dixie and Carla both cried.

“We’re freezing!”

I put the key into the ignition but accidentally turned it too far. Metallic scream.

“We’re freezing!”

It was Dixie who spoke next. “He’s dying of cancer, you know, that’s why they cut off his legs, now he has to take drugs because the pain hurts him so bad.”

She said it too loud, perhaps because of the the radio. I turned it off. She said it again, more quietly this time.

It was 6:30 in the morning. The sky to the east was beginning to lighten.

When I got to Market Street, I could see their car, the old black Cadillac, still there where we left it. Except it wasn’t black anymore; now it was gray, the color of early dawn.

“Well, here we are. Want to go ahead and give it a try?”

Dixie and Carla had already gotten out. Dixie climbed into the driver seat of the gray Cadillac. The cold engine immediately roared to life. Black dust and ash spewed into the air.

A small hand came out and wiped the frost away from the driver side window.

When their car left the parking lot, I followed behind, unsure of what it would be able to do. However, as soon as it was in the street it accelerated to a surprising speed. I followed. It continued to gain speed. I followed as closely as I could, but I was finding it difficult to keep up. The gray car continued moving further ahead.

The sun was rising. It's red reflection suddenly appeared in the gray windows of dawn. It was in the thousand windows of the gray skyscrapers, in the vast wide windows of the bakeries and gift shops.

I tried my best to follow, but the Cadillac pulled still farther ahead. It made a sudden turn. Something seemed to be wrong with my accelerator. I hit the gas, but my car didn't respond.

They turned left onto Brittain Road, a hilly four-lane highway. I was now only able to see them for a few seconds at a time when I came down a long slope. But when they reached the top of the next hill I lost sight of them again.

The sun was now more than halfway above the horizon. Corporate buildings and executive offices made of glass reflected its rays.

I followed them as long as I could, but they pulled farther ahead. And the million suns hid them.

IF I HAD A WISH THAT I COULD WISH
FOR YOU.

I could hardly see them as they began their ascent on the next hill. Their car had become white, so white that beams of the sun reflected from its surface. They were pointed upwards now, straight into the rising sun.

I lost them in the glare.

I saw them once more. They were a mirage now, floating above the shimmering road, suspended in sunshine.

When the orange disc separated itself from the horizon, they were gone.