

# Instead of Three Wishes

MAGICAL SHORT STORIES



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**FACTORY**

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On his last night in the government-sponsored orphanage, John climbed to the top floor of the building to look out at the world. The city he lived in was huge. It stretched from horizon to horizon, and on an overcast night, like this one, the tallest buildings disappeared into the rain clouds that were swollen with the reflected orange of the streetlights below. Many blocks away, John could see the Gerwinks-Primary Factory, where he would begin work the next day. It was the largest of the factory buildings. It stretched for more than nine city blocks

and was lit twenty-four hours a day by arc lights that were shocking white in contrast to the cheaper yellow streetlights that glowed on all sides. Work went on around the clock at Gerwinks-Primary. All employees were expected to be on call for emergency shifts. John watched what he could see of the bustling activity and wondered if he, too, would soon be hard at work in the middle of the nights. He wondered if there was any way to know, from the inside of the building, if the sun was shining or not.

There was a subtle change in the night sky overhead. The view of the world, and Gerwinks-Primary, was cut off by sheets of rain rolling down the windowpane. John went to bed.

The next morning he and seven other potential employees were waiting in the factory yard for the shift foreman. When the foreman arrived, he waved them into a small office without trying to compete with the noise of men and machines. Once inside the office, with the door closed, he introduced himself and explained the conditions of employment at G-P.

"You all will be on probation until you test out. Psych profiles have placed you in these jobs, but psych profiles and the government computers aren't infallible. People who can't get along in their jobs can expect to be fired. In the meantime, the factory will assign you a sleeping cubicle, and a food schedule, and will supply one uniform appropriate to your employment. Each of you will be assigned to a senior employee to be trained. John, you'll be with me. I know as much about the high cranes as anybody. Let's get started."

The foreman led them out onto the factory floor. One by

one, he dropped employees at their workstations until only John was left. Then he led the way to a ladder that climbed up one wall until it disappeared into a catwalk near the roof. John craned his head back to see what he could make of the machinery up there but didn't look long. It hurt his neck and made his stomach feel peculiar. He looked back down when the foreman began talking.

"I understand your psych profile says you enjoy working by yourself, and you're not afraid of heights. Normally you'd be trained by someone who works these cranes every day, but the last operator walked off the job without giving notice, and I can't spare one of the lower crane workers to break you in. Fortunately, I worked this crane and every other at Gerwinks. Used to be a high crane man before I was promoted. I'm pretty sure I remember the important stuff. We only use the big crane once or twice a day, so you should have plenty of time to figure out anything you need to know, and the rest of the shift will go easy on you for a bit. Any questions before we climb up?"

John had only one question. "That guy, the one that used to work the crane, he quit?" John had never heard of anyone quitting a job.

"Yeah, he said he got bored up there. Said he was lonely." The foreman shrugged.

Someone behind one of the surrounding machines called out, "Why didn't he just admit he was afraid of ghosts?"

The foreman looked in the unidentified workman's direction. John didn't hear him say anything, but the man at the machine turned quickly back to his work.

The foreman turned back to John. "Let's get started," he said, and began to climb the ladder.



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The operation of the big crane was simple, but it responded slowly to instructions and so took some skill to operate. After the first few times up and down the ladder, the height ceased to bother John, and after the first week or so he was no longer winded and puffing when he finished his climb. This and one other thing seemed to prove the validity of his psych profile. John was entitled to one fifteen-minute coffee break every two hours, and a half-hour food break twice a day. But even after a month of building his muscles on the never-ending ladder, John couldn't get down from the crane and back up in less than eleven minutes. On coffee breaks, that left him four minutes to spend in the employee break room before he had to head back up to work. So he didn't climb down for his breaks and only rarely climbed down for the nineteen minutes he could grab at lunch. He didn't mind the lack of company, he preferred to be alone, but he missed the hot coffee. He went to the employee store to find a thermos. The shop girl was expecting him.

"Is it a thermos you're looking for?"

"Yes, it is, how did you know?"

"Well, I'd heard that there was a new man on the high crane, and every new man gets a thermos so he can take his breaks up top."

"Every one? Have you seen many people in this job?"

"Oh, yeah, three or four. Nobody lasts long. They claim that they get lonely up there, but if they weren't loners, they wouldn't have gotten the job in the first place. It's the ghosts." John wanted her to explain, but a look from her boss silenced her. John took his thermos and went back to work.

With a thermos and a boxed lunch, John was very happy. Once a week, he would check books out of the factory library and carry them in a pack up to the crane. During his fifteen-minute breaks, he would stretch out on the catwalk with a book and a cup of coffee, reading and sipping until a buzzer summoned him back to work. On the longer lunch breaks, he liked to climb to a particular alcove formed by crossing I beams and settle in for a longer read. So far above the factory floor, the noises of the individual machines and the shouts of the workers below were softened and provided a pleasant background. John felt he was in a world of his own.

For the first time, he had a little privacy to think his own thoughts. He didn't need to worry about what the Matron might discern from the expressions on his face. There was no one to bother him, no one to interrupt his reading as he paged through book after book.

"Excuse me. Excuse me." The voice repeated itself several times before John realized that high above the rest of the world someone was talking to him. He looked up. Standing with her hands on her hips and her head tilted forward was a girl with long dark hair. She was wearing a shapeless blue sweater and lighter blue pants. Her legs disappeared into the iron grille of the catwalk just above the ankles. John swallowed and gripped the covers of his book tightly. He continued staring at those feet, or anyway at the catwalk where the feet should be, until the girl said, "Excuse me," again in an exasperated voice. John wasn't sure how many times she'd said it already, but he suspected quite a few.

"Yes?" He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"You're sitting on my book. Could you move for a moment?"

"Uh, sure." John crabbed sideways about two feet. Away from the girl.

"Thank you," she said, "I don't like to reach through people in order to get things." She leaned forward and stuck out a hand. For just a second, John saw a book in that hand, and then she was gone.

That afternoon, John climbed down the ladder to eat his lunch in the employee break room. He looked around for a familiar face, and when he saw one he recognized, he went and sat down beside it. John had little experience in opening conversations, so he ate his lunch in silence. Only when he thought the other man might leave without saying anything at all did John begin.

"You, uh, you said something when I first started work, didn't you? Something about the guy who worked before me being afraid of ghosts."

"Oh," the man replied. "Are you the new guy on the high crane?"

John nodded.

"Yeah, I saw the guy come down from the crane one day, white as a sheet. The next day he didn't show up for work. The factory said he got bored and quit, but we all figured he'd seen a ghost."

A woman across the table heard the man and looked up. She smiled at John. "The factory does not believe in ghosts," she said. "No one is supposed to mention them." But she encouraged the man to tell the story. Other employees around them leaned closer. Ghost stories around the lunch table were too entertaining to be prevented by factory policy.

Many years before, the city had been smaller. At its outer

fringes were green spaces, public parks, and private estates. As the city grew, the green spaces disappeared, the parks were rezoned, and the estates were absorbed in lieu of taxes owed to the government. Only one open space remained.

"Before this factory stood on this piece of land, there was a preserve here," the machine operator began. "Owned by a family named Gerwinks. They had a big house on a hill in the middle of it and all around was trees and bushes and grass. There was a wall that kept the rest of the world out, and inside the wall there was supposed to be animals like rabbits and squirrels and things that hadn't been seen in the city for years. One day a bunch of businessmen came to see Old Man Gerwinks and said they wanted to buy the land. He said no. They kept offering more money, and he kept saying no. Well, lo and behold, one day Old Man Gerwinks gets smooshed by a truck right outside his own front gates. Too bad, bad brakes on the truck. Such a tragic accident."

"The businessmen go to Mrs. Gerwinks. They say how sorry they are about her husband and would she like to sell the property? Mrs. Gerwinks was tougher than they expected. She says no, just like the old man. So the businessmen went to the government and said that the land was going to waste. It shouldn't be allowed. If the land had a factory on it, the factory would make money and provide jobs, jobs people needed. So the government changed some laws and told Mrs. Gerwinks to sell."

"The old widow went to court. She said the land was special. She thought that anyone who wanted should be able to walk through the park. But the court told her that people didn't need grass and trees—they needed more buildings. The court told her she had to move. But the business-



men assured her that everyone would remember her husband because they would call the new factory the Gerwinks building.

"The judge gave the widow and her family until the end of the week to move out. She told the judge she intended to live and die in that house and nothing he said had changed her mind. She would live in it forever. She went home and locked the gates behind her.

"The bulldozers showed up on schedule Monday morning. Nobody had seen any sign that the family had moved out. The bulldozers rolled right through the gates and up the hill to the house, and that's where they found them." The man paused again in his monologue and took a sip of coffee.

"Found them?" John prompted, though he could guess the end of the story.

"All of them," the man said. "The whole family. The widow and her kids and her brother and his kids. She'd poisoned everybody who lived in the house, and they were all dead."

There was silence at the table. For a moment the noise of other employees in the lunchroom seemed very far away.

"Then what happened?" John asked.

The machine operator looked at John in surprise. He lifted his coffee cup and waved it at the walls around him. "What do you think happened, son? They buried those people and tore down that house and flattened the trees and stuck up this big old factory, and that's why we all have jobs and make money and aren't living somewhere in a doorway."

"But the ghosts come back," another employee insisted. "Every time there's been an accident with the machines

somebody says they saw the widow Gerwinks come back to check on her property."

"My cousin works in the south factory, and she swears she saw two kids chasing a ball down an aisle," said another. "A week later a water pipe broke and the works were flooded for three days."

"But nobody admits to seeing the ghosts anymore," someone warned John. "People who do lose their jobs."

The machine operator put his coffee cup down and got to his feet. "Now, he said, "it is time to go back to those jobs, before the foreman comes looking for us."

Too late, John noticed the foreman sitting across the crowded room, looking at the cluster of employees. The group dissolved as each person hurried back to work, but the foreman's eyes remained on John. As John headed for the door, the foreman rose from his table and met him on the way.

"I'd like a word with you," he said, and walked with John back to the base of the ladder to the high crane. When they reached the ladder, the foreman took his arm.

"The factory doesn't like to hear too much talk about things it doesn't believe in. Contrary to what you may have heard, the factory has never found a single problem caused by ghosts. So if you meet any ectoplasmic spirits up there in the high crane, I suggest you be polite and they'll probably be polite right back. You're up there alone for fourteen hours a day, and you might find it's nice to have someone to talk to."

John started back up to work wondering if the foreman believed or didn't believe in the haunting. For the rest of the day and the rest of the week, John watched for another

visitation, but as far as he could tell, he was alone above the factory floor. Each morning on his way in, the foreman picked him out of the rest of the shiftworkers and nodded a greeting.

It was ten days before John saw his ghost girl again. This time he saw her from the crane's cab as he floated by, ferrying a broken press to the repair shop. He couldn't stop, couldn't even slow down the crane. He just turned his head slowly and stared until she was hidden by the I beams of the alcove she haunted. She was floating eighteen inches above the catwalk, sitting with her feet stretched in front of her, reading a book. She never looked up.

After that, John saw her almost every day. Always in the same place, the alcove formed by crossing roof supports. Always she was reading. John couldn't make out what book. He no longer ate his lunch there, but he found excuses to send the crane by in the early afternoon. Rolling silently on the rails that crisscrossed the roof, he could watch for her from a safe distance. Once he saw her rising up through the catwalk as if she were climbing invisible stairs, holding a book open in front of her while she climbed. As much as he saw her, she never seemed to see him.

John thought, as he drifted along the roof, of the foreman's advice. Be polite. Maybe they'll be polite back. John had read more books since he started work at G-P than he had in his entire life. Reading the books was a luxury he would never grow tired of, but it would be nice to have someone to talk to, someone else who liked to read. When he had screwed up his courage, he walked over during a lunch break.

"Uh, hello."

The girl looked up in surprise. She put the book she was reading down beside her and it disappeared. John stood silent, tongue-tied by terror or shyness.

The girl continued to look up at him. "Did you want something?"

John swallowed and stammered, "Well, no. It's just that I've seen you here reading and I thought I'd, well, that it would, I mean, I just wanted to say hello. To be polite."

"That is very, very polite of you. Shall we introduce ourselves?"

"My name is John."

"My name is Edwina. It's nice to meet you, John." She smiled at him, and John felt the terror, or the shyness, whichever it was, break into pieces and disappear as if it had fallen through the catwalk at his feet. When she asked if there was something in particular he might like to talk about, now that they were introduced, John had an answer ready.

"What are you reading?"

It was a book by a man named John Muir. John had never heard of him, but Edwina said they were very interesting essays on nature. John was just promising to look them up in the library when the buzzer sounded, calling him back to work. Edwina told him to stop in and see her again the next day.

John looked for her during his next shift but didn't see her. It was the day after that that she was sitting in her usual place looking like a statue as well as a ghost. She moved only to flip the pages in her book.

She looked up and smiled when John said hello.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here yesterday after all. I was busy all



day chasing dust balls with a mop. I've been here for hours today, though. Have you been busy or have you been ignoring me to teach me a lesson?"

"Neither," said John, "I've only seen you here for the last few minutes. I radioed down that I was going on break and came right over. You weren't here before."

"Strictly speaking," she said, "I'm not here now. At least I am in my here, but not your here."

"Exactly where are you," John collected up enough nerve to ask, "if you are not here?"

"Where is here, you mean?" she asked. "Here in deadland, in ghostdom, in limbo?"

"Is it, uh, heaven?" John asked, thinking back to his rudimentary instruction in religion.

"If it is," said the girl with a laugh, "it's everything it should be, but severely underpopulated. There's just us: Mother and Uncle Tim, and Todd and Eunice, and Richie and Alex and Angela and me. I never thought of heaven as being quite this exclusive. Is it your idea of heaven?"

"I don't know enough about it to say," said John, referring to his scant information on heaven, but the girl, Edwina, took him to mean her home.

"Sit down," she said, "and I'll tell you about it. You're the first nice ghost to come along in years and years."

Edwina described the house she lived in with her mother and uncle, her sister and sister's husband, her brother, Richie, and her cousins, Alex and Angela. The house she lived in was exactly the same as it had been just before the demolition team arrived. The days passed and the seasons changed, but year after year the house was exactly the same.

"And we have the mythical never-empty wallet of food

as well," Edwina explained. "As often as we take a cup of flour from its canister, a fresh cup takes its place. We have as much of everything now as we had when we started being dead."

John choked on his lunch. Edwina continued, "But we never have anything new, of course. Mother shopped very carefully, right up to the last, but even back then there were things you couldn't get easily. Chocolate, for instance. We've gone years and years without a taste of chocolate. I think the boys might have forgotten what it tastes like, but I still dream about it."

"Nothing ever changes? Not at all?"

"Oh, some things. Little things," said Edwina. "Mother has a stack of flower bulbs in the shed, and every year she plants them in a different pattern. We move the furniture around from time to time, but it always gets moved back eventually. Once there was a man who read poetry aloud, and I wrote it down. But that's the only new thing to come into our world since we died."

"And we never get any older. Richie and Alex will always be ten. My sister and Robert will always be newlyweds. Angela will always be two. And I will always be the only one with no one my own age to talk to."

"You have me to talk to," pointed out John.

Edwina smiled. "You aren't afraid to talk to a ghost?"

"Not at all." John realized the truth as he said it.

"Then I'll meet you here every day and you can tell me about all the books you have in your world that I don't have in mine. Do you read poetry?"

The room that Edwina saw when she sat and read was an attic. It was at the top of the house, which had stood on

the top of a hill, and this was the only part of the house that reached as high as the roof of the factory. If he concentrated very hard, John found he could see the old chaise lounge that Edwina sat on, and in the mist he could see the room around her, the bare floorboards, and the curtains covering the window behind her. He saw them most clearly when Edwina read to him.

Edwina made a point of reading for a few minutes in the early afternoon when John took his breaks. He told her that John Muir's books weren't in the library. They'd been banned for many years because of their subversive content. Edwina didn't think they were subversive at all, and she read one of them aloud during John's breaks, to prove it. It took a week, partly because John interrupted over and over again to ask questions about the trees and animals that Muir described.

"Holy Cow," said Edwina when he asked her to describe a squirrel, "how can you not know what a squirrel looks like? Haven't you seen any animals at all? Next you'll tell me that there aren't any pigeons, and I won't believe you because I don't believe anything but nuclear war would get rid of pigeons."

"Pigeons?"

"They're a kind of bird."

"We have birds. Big black and gray things that leave white streaks on the statues."

"Those are pigeons," said Edwina, a little relieved to find something familiar left in the world.

"But we don't call them pigeons."

"What do you call them, then?"

"Just birds, there's only one kind."

So Edwina did her best to describe all the different birds

that she saw around her every day. There were sparrows and finches and doves. There were two different kinds of woodpeckers and a couple of titmice. There might be an owl living out in the woods. They thought they heard one from time to time, but they'd never seen it. Once she'd mentioned the woods, she had to describe those, too. They surrounded the house on all sides. Some parts were overgrown with brambles, and other parts, where the oldest trees grew, had a thick carpet of leaves on the ground and nothing else but the trunks of oaks and maples and the occasional evergreen. Edwina brought samples of different leaves to show John. Once she pulled the curtain away from the window and read him a poem about a man in a forest, and John strained his eyes to see the green trees outside, but he couldn't. All he saw was sunlight.

In return, John found books in the library that she had heard of but never read. She asked for poetry by a woman named Emily Dickinson, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. He read the poetry aloud and she copied it down. They both enjoyed the Dickinson, but didn't think much of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

"She has such a lovely name, though, doesn't she?" said Edwina.

"Have there been other people that you could see?" John asked one day.

"Other ghosts, you mean?" Edwina persisting in thinking of the people of John's world as ghosts. "After all, I feel solid to me," she had pointed out. "You're the ones who are all misty."

Yes, there were other ghosts. Edwina saw them from time



to time as they floated through her attic room. John was not the only one who favored the alcove formed by crossing I beams as a lunch spot. Occasionally ghosts did appear in other places.

"But remember, the rest of the house is below the roof of your factory but above the floor. Mother sees ghosts in the cellar whenever she goes down. And out in the meadow they appear three times a day, right on schedule. Hundreds of them sitting on benches and eating invisible food."

"Did any of them talk to you?"

"There was a man who talked to me quite a lot. He read me poetry, but he wouldn't read me any of Edna St. Vincent Millay. He said it wasn't worth the effort of carrying it up the ladder. I think he was right."

John was surprised by faint stirrings of jealousy. "What did he read instead?"

"I still have it all," said Edwina. "Wait while I get it." She rummaged through shadowy furniture, her arms disappearing to the elbow sometimes, and returned with a rumpled pile of papers. She read aloud poets and titles and snatches of poetry. Alexander Pope, John Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes," Anne Bradstreet . . .

John asked what had happened to the provider of the poetry. Edwina told him that the man had been promoted after a few years to work on a different crane.

"He came back to visit several times, but then he said he was getting too busy, and I didn't see him again. I missed him when he was gone, or maybe I just missed his poetry. It was nice to have something new in the world, but I think it bothered him that he was growing older and I wasn't. He must have decided to spend his time with people in his own world."

. . .

John went down to the library the next day. He ignored the poetry section but selected carefully from a shelf of old detective novels.

They were highly successful. He read aloud from them over the next several weeks. Edwina's only complaint was that these were books that should be read while gorging on little chocolates filled with caramel, or maybe slightly sticky candy bars.

"Too bad," she said, "we haven't any chocolate at all. Not even to cook with."

"It's too bad mysteries are so much harder to copy down than poetry. I will miss them when you're gone."

"When I'm gone?" John hadn't thought about leaving, about being promoted or even transferred to another factory. He felt suddenly wretched and wished for the first time that he lived in a world like Edwina's where nothing ever changed.

"Edwina, how did you get the way you are? Did your mother really poison you?"

"Well. It was more than poison. I think she knew even during the trial that things wouldn't work out. She started collecting all kinds of food, and she did peculiar things. She poured flour and salt along the walls of the estate, and she painted every tree with paste. There was a terrific amount of work that had to be done. And she worried about Angela. She had a cold, and Mother said she couldn't guess which would be worse, to be a two-year-old with a cold forever or to live with a two-year-old with a cold forever. So she did everything she could to delay until Angela was better."

"Did you know?"

"You mean, during the last bit? No. We just ate dinner

together and went to bed. Everyone else slept through it but me. I woke up with a terrible headache and wobbled around until I fell out the window."

"You what?"

"Fell out the window. That one over there." She gestured to the curtain behind her. "I broke my back. My spine is all wobbly now, but it doesn't hurt."

"Will you really never change?"

"Never, never, never. You will get older and go away and forget all about me, and I will still be here. Lonely, with no one my own age to talk to and no chocolates." She pulled a sad face, and John laughed, even as he realized that he couldn't stand to grow older and be promoted and leave the high crane and Edwina forever.

"I will bring you chocolates," he said.

Edwina talked to her mother. Her mother climbed the stairs to Edwina's attic and talked to John for a long time. Just the two of them. Then John began collecting library books. He overcharged his card and anyone else's card he could borrow. He hid the books in secret places along the catwalk. He used his entire salary buying chocolates and obscure spices. And one day, during his lunch break, he drank his coffee laced with cyanide and lay down on the catwalk and listened to Edwina reading aloud a poem written in Greece more than two thousand years before John was born. It was really just the remaining pieces of a longer work, but Edwina had arranged the fragments to her liking and read them as if they were all part of a single poem.

stop traveler and rest  
here in the shade of the trees

away from the dust of the road  
near a graceful pavilion

Listen to the wind in the long leaves  
the birds in the bushes  
the water in the fountain  
Sleep

as the shadows creep  
as the sun

turns in the sky

Wake in the cool evening  
when swallows seek their rest  
Refreshed  
as the moon rises.

At the end of John's breaktime, there was no sign of life in the high crane. The foreman climbed up.

The books were returned to the library. No one knew what to do with the boxes of chocolate and the cinnamon. The day-shift foreman took them home.

Several months later, the new crane operator pulled the foreman aside to tell him what he'd seen as he rolled by in his crane: two people, a young man and a woman, sitting on invisible furniture with their feet up, reading books and eating chocolates.



