

'The One Wish Foundation'

By

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The One Wish Foundation

‘You can’t smoke in here, Gerry,’ snapped the waitress, without pausing from her vigorous scrubbing of the beyond-rescue Formica table at which he slumped.

The table was pock-marked with black-edged burns from a million previous cigarettes; they told the story of a million slow-burn dreams which had gradually faded away. Nevertheless, our waitress tried to wipe away those fossilised dreams. Her gigantic arse wobbled away with abandon as she brought that dirty grey cloth back and forth. Gerry cast me a baleful look, acknowledging the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. I met his eyes just once, and then lowered them again to my broadsheet, hiding behind headlines such as: ‘Philanthropy or Tax Evasion? One Wish Foundation to be investigated by Government’.

We were the only customers in the café. It was getting late; many of the chairs had already been stacked on the empty tables and the ample-bosomed waitress had started to brush up under my feet a moment ago, not so subtly trying to inform me that she wanted to close up and go home. I sat in the corner and nursed my steaming coffee – so hot it never seemed to cool – and hoped that I wouldn’t be noticed again for a while.

When I looked again, the waitress had taken the seat opposite Gerry and was silently watching him, daring him to light up another cigarette, which he duly did. He pulled a lamp-post long Dorchester and Gray from that familiar red packet, wedged it somewhere between the creeper-vine-like wisps of his moustache and beard and reached for a box of cooks’ matches from the pile of his belongings on the plastic bench.

‘Gerry – please don’t do that; you can come back again in the morning. Wait for them then,’ said the waitress, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the café’s only decoration – a faded One Wish Foundation calendar which had red-ink x’s marked in every day that had passed, as though it was some kind of a countdown.

Gerry took no notice and struck the match against the side of the box with the extravagance of a conductor making his first sweeping instruction to an invisible orchestra. Light fizzed; touched the end of his cigarette, and all was well in his world again. He closed his eyes in appreciation of his first hit of nicotine. The waitress shook her head wearily – *her triple chin bouncing along for effect* - but made no real attempt to stop him from smoking. Indeed as her face turned into profile, I noted that she was wearing a look of complete and utter indifference tucked within the flabby folds. Her earlier snappy tone, her disapproval, was all for show; perhaps part of some long-practiced ritual between them.

Gerry’s only response was a magnificently exaggerated suck on the dimp – *he’d already managed to suck down three quarters of the cigarette in two drags* - followed by a cloud of smoke from his dragon-mouth. The waitress coughed and spluttered a little and then produced one of those tin-foil disposable ash-trays from the pocket at the front of her apron.

‘If I had one wish, it would be that you would at least use an ash-tray,’ she said, in a low, monotonously bored voice. ‘Honestly, you wouldn’t do that in your own home, would you?’

Gerry snorted a half-laugh which then exploded into a fit of coughing. The three-quarters of the cigarette that he’d already chowed down - stray bits of tobacco, threads of spittle and acid-yellow smoke - erupted from some unknown point behind his beard. His whole head looked as though it was on fire. I suddenly knew where the

expression ‘smoked like a chimney’ came from; it came from some passer-by who’d been showered by the molten lava of one of Gerry’s Vesuvian coughing fits.

His whole body rattled in complaint; he became the human version of the little container in which you shake the dice in a board game. You could hear lung crash against bone, kidney against wasted muscle, false tooth against metal filling. He banged the table like a wrestler on the mat, announcing his submission: *disease, please let me out of this head-lock.*

Finally, Gerry’s coughing eased into a more normal mixture of intermittent wheezes and hiccups. When even these finished, Gerry took another blast of the cigarette for good measure before thrusting it into the centre of the tin-foil ashtray with such force I thought it just might spear its way through foil, table and the flesh of the legs which were nestled underneath. Wordlessly, the waitress handed him the dirty grey cloth and he wiped his mouth a couple of times, just for appearances sake.

‘I’ll get you a glass of water,’ muttered the waitress.

Gerry grunted his disapproval of the idea.

‘Don’t worry; water’s free in here,’ she said. With great difficulty she managed to extricate herself from behind the table and she waddled off behind the counter. As she passed me, I lowered my eyes still further, but still caught the tell-tale scent of grease and bleach floating luxuriantly in her wake.

With the waitress absent, Gerry seemed stuck for an audience until he remembered little old me, tucked away in the corner. He began to stare at me, occasionally mumbling something entirely incomprehensible which I suppose that I was expected to respond to. Evidently, old Gerry decided that my ignorance was not by choice, but rather because I couldn’t hear him, because soon he began to shuffle across the black and white tile floor towards my table, shouting at me now.

Please let him just be going to the toilet. Please let him just pass by the table.
Please don't let him try to speak to me again, said a voice in my head

Gerry must have read the discomfort in my face but chosen to ignore it, or to exacerbate it even further. He eased himself onto the plastic bench opposite me and started to fiddle absently with the salt shaker, pouring small molehills of salt onto the table. I wished that there were other customers in here that it would be more amusing for him to pester. We were in a bus station café, for God's sake, surely there would be *somebody* that had just missed a bus and needed a warming cup of tea while they were waiting for the next one? But no, there was only one bus left. I knew that only too well.

'Buy us a brew,' he said, gruffly.

I ignored him, stared even harder at the minutia of the forthcoming selling-off down of the local factory – some people stood to make millions on the deal.

'Mister: can you please buy me a cup of tea?'

I looked up from the newspaper, met his eyes. His eyelids emerged from his face like over-boiled conchiglie pasta; he looked over-tired.

'My bus is leaving soon; I've only got enough change for the fare,' I said, slowly. I shook the broadsheet and held it erect in front of my face like a shield.

'Ha!' said Gerry suddenly, as though proving a point. 'I've been waiting for you. You're the one, aren't you?'

I didn't answer. Gerry's crusty fingers curled round the edges of my newspaper. I felt an involuntary shudder of revulsion; when most people touch newspaper they get black ink all over their hands as though their fingerprints are being taken, in Gerry's case, his hands were *already* that black, and as greasy as tomorrow's fish and chip wrappers.

‘You’re one of them, aren’t you?’ he insisted, pulling the paper down away from my face.

‘I’m not one of anyone,’ I said coldly, wondering where the damn waitress had gone. She needed to control her customers better. I’ve seen people like Gerry before, with their yawning-chasm pleading-eyes. It is no surprise that I can smell drink off him; these people have nothing to fill their holes but to pour cheap carry-outs down them.

‘Ah! Don’t play silly beggars. You are ‘im, aren’t you?’

‘Leave me alone,’ I snarled, my well of patience now run dry.

Gerry smiled, or at least I think that he smiled. His face creased into a mess of lines and bumps, nooks and crannies; irreparable structural damage was being done to his cheek bones. I swear that I saw a lone tooth emerge from his beard.

‘You thought I’d be harder to fool, eh?’ he said.

I drained the last dregs of my still-scorching coffee and got up from my seat. Gerry looked at me with confusion in his eyes.

‘See you later,’ I said, and walked to the counter.

‘Come back,’ he begged. *We’ll see about playing silly beggars now, won’t we,* said that voice in my head, a sliver of cruelty in its tone now.

At the counter, I was just in time to see the waitress puff and pant her way through a door which led out to the back of the café. She was clutching a precarious tower of cleaned plates. I waited for her to deposit them on the metal surface and then join me at the till.

‘Yes love?’ she asked, still severely short of breath.

‘I’d just like to pay for my coffee now,’ I said.

‘*Water!*’ said the woman, nonsensically.

‘I had coffee...’

‘No... *Gerry’s* water,’ she said, slapping her palm against her forehead. ‘I’ve only gone and forgotten his majesty’s water.’

His majesty? shouted that voice in my head again. *Maybe he’s one of these tramps that you always hear about that have loads of money – even a mansion – tucked away somewhere but they just like living rough. Every town’s got one of them...*

‘Hold on duck,’ said the waitress, ‘I’ll just get his...’

‘Can I pay first?’ asked my real, polite-society voice. ‘I have a bus to catch.’ *I also wanted to see about watching this old tramp a bit more closely; even the most far-fetched urban myths have some sort of grounding in reality don’t they? That would be my wish...*

The waitress seemed caught in two minds. Maybe she feared that if she actually did go and fill a glass with water, I’d do a runner without paying the fifty-nine pence for my own drink. Gerry seized the opportunity with both hands. Without me noticing, he’d staggered to the counter too, and was now clutching at the sleeve of my Gucci jacket as though he wouldn’t let me go.

‘It’s ‘im,’ he bellowed. ‘Don’t let ‘im go.’

Startled, I dragged my arm away from his clutches. The waitress moved out from behind the counter and filled the space between us with her massive bulk. Gerry and I eyed each other with suspicion.

‘You bloody alco,’ I shouted.

‘Leave. Now,’ snarled the waitress. I waited for a moment for Gerry to leave, before realising that she actually meant me. Now I was the one confused. I pulled a

pound coin from my pocket and thrust it into one of her fat hands. Angry, I stalked out of the café.

Outside, in the neon buzz of the bus station, I pressed my face against the fogged glass of the café and watched the waitress calming old Gerry down. She gave him his glass of water, and had also, for some reason, pulled the old One Wish Foundation calendar off the hook behind the counter; together, they marked a large, red 'x' in the space for today.

When he left the café, she called after him: 'Don't worry Gerry; come back tomorrow! Maybe they'll show up then...'

'I can only wish,' muttered Gerry as he walked away. I was following him so closely; I could hear everything that the wizened old drunk said to himself. Some people didn't deserve their One Wish.

ENDS