

# Wishes

by Chris Roberson

A man wandered into town, back in the dust days (because that's how people remembered them, those who lived long enough into the next century of interstate highways and high flying aeroplanes; in those times, back before there had always seemed to be dust everywhere, along the beaten dirt tracks, in the open fields, down under the first bones of the county courthouse, everywhere dust). The town was called Eden, then, though everyone knew that wouldn't last; there was another Eden, they'd been told, with a post office of its own, and the State of Texas could not abide two Edens.

The man came into town from the west, down out of the hills, on foot, alone and without horse or wagon. It was not unheard of to travel thus, even in those days, though to be honest it was common only among madmen and would-be prophets. The plains to the west, beyond the hills, were vast, and barren, and a man afoot could travel weeks, months, without once seeing another soul, even in those days. So the people of the town, of Eden, took him for a madman, or a prophet, and were eager to see the back of him.

The man, though, showed no immediate signs of lunacy, nor did he speak of divine inspiration. He asked only for a bit to eat, and perhaps a place to sleep out of the rain. The people of the town looked at him, threadbare and ragged, and asked what he could have to give them in return. He had only the clothes on his back, a battered old hat, a small satchel he wore slung over his shoulder, and a staff for walking. He didn't look the type to keep riches secreted on his person, and food and shelter from the rain did not come cheap, even in those days.

When the people asked him what he had to give, he replied simply: I have wishes to share. Now the people, who already suspected him a lunatic or a visionary, took this as an ill sign. So, they asked him, you are a fairy, or some good witch that you can grant wishes? The man shook his head, and smiled. No, he told them, I have only wishes, no miracles.

Now the people of the town were divided, one half against the other, on just what sort of undesirable the man was. And no one offered him food, or shelter. The man seemed not to mind and sat himself on the dusty ground at the town's center where he took from his satchel a bone flute that he began to play, quietly, as though to himself. The people stepped around him then, acting as though he didn't exist, and hoped in soft whispers that the sheriff would return from his errand out of town and drive the man away.

The morning passed to afternoon, and still the man sat, and still he played. The afternoon was aging towards evening when the blacksmith, with his young wife, returned from a visit to her cousins in the north of the county. The blacksmith had been born a Slav (and while his family claimed to Gypsy blood, there was no proof of it), and was a good man, and would have been a better blacksmith had he the strength in his arms. As it was, he was a fair smith, and that was as much as the town needed (and the town needed a smith, as all towns did, even in those days).

Passing through the town's center with his wife, he heard the man playing his bone flute, and stopped to ask a neighbor who the man was. A lunatic, the neighbor answered, come out of the west. No, another replied, walking by, a prophet full of snake venom and nonsense from over the hills.

What does he want, the blacksmith asked. Food, the others answered, and a place to bed. Now, the blacksmith remembered his first night in his new country, poor and bone weary from his deck passage across the wide water. And he remembered the family that had given him bread, and a few coins for a place to stay. So he left his wife in the wagon, and walked to where the man sat and played.

Stranger, the smith said, I have heard you need a place to rest yourself, and something to eat.

It is true, the man answered, but I have no money to pay. I have only wishes to share, and nothing else.

We ask nothing from you, the smith told him, but we will share whatever you have.

And so the man smiled and stood, taking the smith's hand. They walked to the wagon, and then the smith, his young wife, and the man who wandered into town rode south to the smith's house.

They dined simply that night. Cornbread, some beans, and a vegetable stew. They drank the sweet water from the smith's well, and the three of them shared a pouch of tobacco. Later, the cabin filled with smoke from the fireplace and their pipes, and the three moved out to the porch and sat watching the stars.

It was a fine meal, and my thanks, the man said. And for that I am in your debt. Now, as I have said, I have no money, but I have the wishes.

The smith's wife asked what he meant, that he had wished. Did he carry them with him, like rare stones or pressed flowers?

No, the man said, but I do collect them. That's what I do, and it's my life's work. I walk, and I wander, and I collect people's wishes.

The smith now said that he didn't understand.

I ask people to tell me their wishes, the man answered, and I keep them up here. The man tapped his temple with one dirtied fingernail.

Why? the smith's wife asked.

So that they don't get lost, the man told her. People lose their wishes too early, too soon in these days, and if I didn't keep them they'd be lost forever.

What do you do with them? asked the smith.

I share them with those as will listen, to remind them.

Remind them? the smith and his wife asked together.

To remind them of this: A wish can never come true if it's forgotten, and once lost can never be regained. Wishes aren't granted of a sudden, in the blink of an eye. A wish is for life, and it's only at the end of that road that you reach a goal. People forget that, and they look back on themselves as children, and all the things they wanted, and craved, and sweated after. And they say, I wanted that then, and I didn't get it, so I best be happy with what I have. Things won't change.

And they're right, the man went on, things won't change unless you want them to. You have to keep on wanting, and keep on sweating, or you'll never move an inch down that road. You'll stay where you are forever.

So, as the stars winked overhead, the man told the smith and his wife wishes. He shared with them the hopes and desires of the young and old (though much more of the former than the latter, as he had explained). He told them of a young girl in Kansas who wanted nothing more in this life than to be a doctor, and to heal, and that as he sat listening to her story he could see the stern face of her father, and the sad eyes of her mother, and that he could almost watch the wish slipping away from the girl. He told them of a rancher's son in the Rockies, who wishes with every inch of him to move east and act on the

stage. He told them of an old widow in Wyoming, who wished that she might see her son, disappeared years before, once more before she died. All of these and more he told them, until the night grew much older, and it was time for sleep.

The smith and his wife took to their bed near the fire, and gave the man a pallet of blankets and quilts for himself on the other side of the room. They slept peacefully that night, the three of them, in the dark warmth of the cabin, until the morning light shone through the windows.

They breakfasted together, there in the early morning light, heavy biscuits and pork sausage and gravy and strong black coffee. They ate in silence, enjoying the meal and the quiet company, and when they had done the man spoke again.

Another fine meal, and a clean dry place to sleep, he said, and I owe you again.

The smith and his wife went to argue, to say he owed them nothing, but the man wouldn't hear it.

I've told you some of the wishes, he said, such as I have to tell. Now, before I go, I'll ask you for your wishes, if you have any, and to repay you I'll keep them with me always.

The smith and his young wife sat quietly for a time, each looking inside themselves, seeing what they might have hidden there. It was the smith's wife who spoke first, and shared what she had.

For myself, she said, I wish for only what I have. For it not to go away. A comfortable house, good neighbors, a faithful and loving husband. I don't care for enchantments, or beauty, or the fancies of the world. I just want what I have, and that's all.

The man sat, listening, and nodded. Then he turned to the smith.

I have a wish, I suppose, the smith said, but it's a simple thing, and of little consequence. I don't wish to hear other men's thoughts, or to have strength to lift a horse, or any of those such things. I want only, someday, for my wife and I to have a son, or a daughter, or both. I want for that child, or those children, to grow up healthy, and to live until they are old. I want them here, in this home, to share our lives. I want to pass things on to them, to raise them right, to send them out into the world to make their own lives and to be happy. It's a simple wish I suppose, and not much for remembering, but that's what I want.

The man smiled at them, and touched them each on the hand. Without a word he rose from the table, put on his hat, slung his satchel over his shoulder, and took up his staff. He walked to the door, where he paused and turned.

I'll remember, he told them both, still sitting there at the table. I'll never forget.

And then he turned, and walked out the door, and out of the town.

The man never passed through the town or was heard from again. But the smith and his wife remembered him, and would talk of him occasionally, out on the porch under a starry sky. And when their children were born, a son and two daughters, they told them about the man, and what he'd said about wishes. And when they grew up, and moved away to live their own lives, they too would sometimes think of the wandering man, and of wishes.

Now, the smith and his wife lived long, into the days of radio and trans-Atlantic flights, and they were comfortable and happy (when it was appropriate), until the day they died (for they died together, of age, in the same bed, each holding the other's hand, with their children and their grandchildren and their grandchildren's children around them). And if anyone still living from those dust days then remember the man sitting in the town's center playing his flute, and that it had been the smith and his young wife who'd

taken him in, they didn't say. The old and the young often forget about wishes, even in those days.

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**About the Author:**

Chris Roberson is the author of the novels *Voices of Thunder*, *Cybermancy Incorporated*, *Set the Seas on Fire*, and *Any Time at All*, which have been reviewed favorably by *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, *SF Site*, *RevolutionSF*, and *Infinity Plus*. His short stories have appeared on *Fantastic Metropolis*, *RevolutionSF*, *OPI8*, and in the Roc anthology *Live Without a Net*. In addition to serving as associate editor for *International Studio* (Coppervale Press), he is the publisher of MonkeyBrain, Inc., an independent imprint.

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