

Wendy's Genie

She could have been anything—a pilot, an astronaut, a deep-sea explorer. She chose to be a mother; a mother and a wife. For Wendy, it was a good choice, one she was still happy with after almost twenty-five years of service. The problem with it, she was just discovering, was that now she needed to move on to a second career. She hadn't ever planned on a second career but with the kids off to college and little to do around the house, the transition seemed inevitable. But when she looked around and examined her options, she saw she wasn't highly qualified to do anything but raise her children and keep her home.

And so, the sadness set in.

Day after day, when her husband went to work, she'd sit at her window seat sipping her tea, reading stories about other women's lives. She especially loved autobiographies of strong women who had blazed a path for others behind them—Margaret Thatcher, Wallace Simpson, Amelia Earhart, Marie Curie.

One afternoon as she sat in the sun and alternated between reading an inspirational autobiography and daydreaming out the window, she suddenly noticed a grey spot, like a cloud, in the window. With the sleeve of her sweater, she wiped at the spot, but it didn't budge. She got her trusty Windex and paper towel and set to work removing the smudge. But still, it wouldn't clear. She rubbed harder and it seemed to grow. She sprayed more Windex and attacked it with a clean paper towel, but still it grew. And as it spread, fingerprints appeared on the window as well.

Wendy rubbed harder, in widening circles, trying to eradicate the smears, but they just grew and multiplied in front of her eyes. She put on gloves, thinking the only logical explanation was that her fingers were actually touching the glass as she cleaned. She sprayed three good shots of Windex onto

the spot and attacked it with a clean paper towel. It almost seemed to be coming clean; at least the finger prints were clearing up, but the fog was getting thicker. She could hardly see her spring garden out of the window anymore. And as she rubbed harder and tried to see out the window more clearly, the whole task started to seem as irritating and pointless as the host of other things she struggled to make right every day—her kids who never called home and only deigned to answer her in monosyllabic grunts when she called them, her husband who came home from work and parked himself in front of his TV in his den to watch sports all night, and her friends who called only when they had problems of their own to talk about and hung up or walked away if she ever even uttered a word about the trials and tribulations of her own life. And as the anger grew, the cloudiness grew and the frustration grew and she rubbed harder and harder until she'd had enough. She stopped and threw the wad of damp, blue stained paper towel against the window.

With a dull pop, the cloud disappeared and out slithered a genie that hovered just above the bench, fussing with his hair and straightening his clothes, taking no notice of her.

After the initial shock subsided, she realized she was either dreaming or imagining the apparition in front of her so she might as well play along and engage the genie. "I suppose I've got three wishes." She cocked an eyebrow and gave him a cheeky grin.

"Don't be ridiculous, that's only in jokes." He rolled his eyes and sidled up beside her, hovering just above the floor, then unscrewed the top of the Windex bottle, tilted it to his lips and took a long haul, sucking down over an inch of the poisonous liquid. "Damn, that's the stuff of the gods, I tell ya." He swiped his arm across his mouth and smacked his lips.

"Wendy, I'm here to give you one thing—just one thing. It can be anything you want. Nothing's too big or too small. You can erase or change one thing from your past. You know, to make it right, be the person you thought you'd be, blah, blah, blah. You know what I'm talking about."

“Really? Anything?” It might be fun to play along, she thought, even if it is a dream.

He chugged another inch of Windex and placed the bottle too close to the edge of the table for Wendy's liking. “But choose carefully. You'll only get this chance once in your life.”

Wendy didn't even have to think. The pivotal moment in her life, the constant pull on her heart was out of her mouth before she could even plan how to say it: “I wish my mom was still with me, alive and well.” And with this declaration came a flood of tears and memories of her mother's brave battle with cancer, which she lost when Wendy was only nineteen.

“You're sure?” The genie was sitting on the island countertop, checking out his nails, not paying any attention to Wendy.

“Oh, God, yes, of course!” she blurted.

“Why don't you just take a few minutes to think about it? Remember, it's irreversible.”

“I don't need to think about it! Do you realize all the things she missed in my life that she would have wanted to see, to be a part of? My wedding, my kids, my—” But just as she started to list the important people and moments in her life, she realized none of them would have been possible without her mother's passing. After all, if she hadn't died, Wendy never would have taken off to France for a year where she met her husband, David. Her mom had been afraid of her own shadow—too timid to travel. She had made Wendy promise, on her death bed, that she would live, would travel, would take risks and see the world.

“Okay, wait. Scratch that. I don't want that.” She did want it, but she wanted the rest of her life too.

“Well then, think of something else.” He sailed back to Wendy’s side and reached again for for the Windex, which she nimbly snatched away.

Wendy looked out at her garden, around her cozy kitchen and let her eyes linger on the refrigerator, packed with magnets and photos. She gazed at her two beautiful children, immortalized through the years, smiling out at her and she felt her heart tug. There were two children missing. Wendy glanced at the genie, which was now passing back and forth through the window, sliding down a sunbeam.

“I’ve got it. I miscarried twins before Katie was born.”

“So you want to make it like that never happened? Sure, easy as pie.” The genie moved to an open spot in the center of the room, crossed his arms in front of his chest, closed his eyes, bowed his head and began to vibrate. His edges became murky, transparent, and then reappeared in high definition. He opened one eye and fixed it on Wendy. “To be clear: No pregnancy, no miscarriage, right?”

“No, I want the miscarriage reversed. I want the twins.”

He uncrossed his arms and floated to the ceiling like a helium balloon. “You’re not going to change your mind?” His arms were dangling just above her head and Wendy stifled the urge to reach up and touch his hand.

“Of course not. I mean, why would I? It wouldn’t hurt anything. It would be good for Katie and Liam to have other siblings. So this house is a little small... we’d be in a bigger house, what with four kids instead of two. But you know, David only ever wanted two kids, so maybe I wouldn’t have even had Katie and Liam, and—oh, just forget it. I’ll think of something else.” Now she was getting annoyed. This

wasn't nearly as much fun as it seemed at first. Good thing she didn't have three wishes. She gave a little sneer to the genie's back.

"Whatever, sister. I've got all day. All of eternity, actually. You just take your time." The genie flew across the kitchen and started vaporizing in and out of drawers and cupboards (banging around amongst her good china), then went about pouring himself into the drain of one sink and emerging from the other. "It's not like anyone else has wishes I need to get to," she thought she heard him say from the cutlery drawer, but she wasn't entirely sure.

She tried to shut out the sounds of his ruckussing by staring out the window and really thinking about her life. She relived and dissected every regret, every wrong turn, every pain to see where she could turn it around to make the present just a little bit easier to take. But as she examined each piece, she realized they all had to happen in their specified order, whether good or bad, to bring her to this exact moment in time to be the woman that she was today—a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister. Everything that mattered to her depended on all the things she had been through in this life.

"Genie, I've decided."

"Oh goodie." His raised eyebrows and fake grin said he was ready for another false alarm, another trigger that wouldn't be pulled. "Let's hear it then," he said, coming dangerously close to nicking the Windex again.

"Nothing. I don't want to change anything."

"What? No, you can't do that. I can't leave until I've changed something. Think! There must be something."

"Nope. Not a second of any day from birth until now." Her smile beamed almost as brightly as the sunbeam.

And just as she was about to tell the genie to hit the road, the front door clanged and she heard David's briefcase hit the entry hall floor. He walked into the kitchen, saw her sitting with her book in the sun like almost every other day, smiled and bent to kiss her. But he stopped about an inch from her lips. "There's a smudge on the window," he said and grabbed for the Windex.

"It's okay, I've got it." She snatched the half-empty bottle of blue liquid out of his reach. "It's pretty stubborn. I think I'll use vinegar instead."

David just shrugged and opened the fridge, clearly not overly concerned.

Wendy looked at his wrinkled back, then let her gaze travel around her kitchen and out into her garden. No, she hadn't changed anything, yet everything was different. Her eyes, her heart and her mind were clear for the first time in as long as she could remember. She winked at the smudge, walked across the kitchen and kissed her husband. "Welcome home, dear."