

The Wish, Ray Bradbury

The Wish

A whisper of snow touched the cold window.
The vast house creaked in a wind from nowhere.

“What?” I said.

“I didn’t say anything.” Charlie Simmons, behind me at the fireplace, shook popcorn quietly in a vast metal sieve. “Not a word.”

“Damn it, Charlie, I heard you . . .”

Stunned, I watched the snow fall on far streets and empty fields. It was a proper night for ghosts of whiteness to visit windows and wander off. “You’re imagining things,” said Charlie.

Am I? I thought. Does the weather have voices? Is there a language of night and time and snow? What goes on between that dark out there and my soul in here?

For there in the shadows, a whole civilization of doves seemed to be landing unseen, without benefit of moon or lamp.

And was it the snow softly whispering out there, or was it the past, accumulations of old time and need, despairs mounding themselves to panics and at last finding tongue?

“God, Charles. Just now, I could have sworn I heard you say—”

“Say what?”

“You said: ‘Make a wish.’”

“I did?”

His laughter behind me did not make me turn; I kept on watching the snow fall and I told him what I must tell—

“You said, ‘It’s a special, fine, strange night. So make the finest, dearest, strangest wish ever in your life, deep from your heart. It will be yours.’ That’s what I heard you say.”

“No.” I saw his image in the glass shake its head.

“But, Tom, you’ve stood there hypnotized by the snowfall for half an hour. The fire on the hearth talked. Wishes don’t come true, Tom. But—” and here he stopped and added with some surprise, “by God, you did hear something, didn’t you? Well, here. Drink.”

The popcorn was done popping. He poured wine which I did not touch. The snow was falling steadily along the dark window in pale breaths.

“Why?” I asked. “Why would this wish jump into my head? If you didn’t say it, what did?”

What indeed, I thought; what’s out there, and who are we? Two writers late, alone, my friend invited for the night, two old companions used to much talk and gossip about ghosts, who’ve tried their hands at all the usual psychic stuffs, Ouija boards, tarot cards, telepathies, the junk of amiable friendship over years, but always full of taunts and jokes and idle fooleries.

But this out there tonight, I thought, ends the jokes, erases smiles. The snow—why, look! It’s burying our laughter. . . .

“Why?” said Charlie at my elbow, drinking wine, gazing at the redgreen-blue Yule-tree lights and now at the back of my neck. “Why a wish on a night like this? Well, it is the night before Christmas, right? Five minutes from now, Christ is born.

Christ and the winter solstice all in one week. This week, this night, proves that Earth won’t die. The winter has touched bottom and now starts upward toward the light. That’s special. That’s incredible.”

“Yes,” I murmured, and thought of the old days when cavemen died in their hearts when autumn came and the sun went away and the ape-

men cried until the world shifted in its white sleep and the sun rose earlier one fine morning and the universe was saved once more, for a little while. “Yes.”

“So—” Charlie read my thoughts and sipped his wine. “Christ always was the promise of spring, wasn’t he? In the midst of the longest night of the year, Time shook, Earth shuddered and calved a myth. And what did the myth yell?”

Happy New Year! God, yes, January first isn’t New Year’s Day. Christ’s birthday is. His breath, sweet as clover, touches our nostrils, promises spring, this very moment before midnight. Take a deep breath, Thomas.”

“Shut up!”

“Why? Do you hear voices again?”

Yes! I turned to the window. In sixty seconds, it would be the morn of His birth. What purer, rarer hour was there, I thought wildly, for wishes.

“Tom—” Charlie seized my elbow. But I was gone deep and very wild indeed. Is this a special time? I thought. Do holy ghosts wander on nights of falling snow to do us favors in this strange-held hour? If I make a wish in secret, will that perambulating night, strange sleeps, old blizzards give back my wish tenfold?

I shut my eyes. My throat convulsed.

“Don’t,” said Charlie.

But it trembled on my lips. I could not wait. Now, now, I thought, a strange star burns at Bethlehem.

“Tom,” gasped Charlie, “for Christ’s sake!”

Christ, yes, I thought, and said:

“My wish is, for one hour tonight—”

“No!” Charlie struck me, once, to shut my mouth.

“—please, make my father alive again.”

The mantel clock struck twelve times to midnight.

“Oh, Thomas . . .” Charlie grieved. His hand fell away from my arm. “Oh, Tom.”

A gust of snow rattled the window, clung like a shroud, unraveled away. The front door exploded wide. Snow sprang over us in a shower.

“What a sad wish. And . . . it has just come true.”

“True?” I whirled to stare at that open door which beckoned like a tomb.

“Don’t go, Tom,” said Charlie.

The door slammed. Outside, I ran; oh, God, how I ran.

“Tom, come back!” The voice faded far behind me in the whirling fall of white. “Oh, God, don’t!”

But in this minute after midnight I ran and ran, mindless, gibbering, yelling my heart on to beat, blood to move, legs to run and keep running, and I thought: Him! Him! I know where he is! If the gift is mine!

If the wish comes true! I know his place! And all about in the night-snowing town the bells of Christmas began to clang and chant and clamor. They circled and paced and drew me on as I shouted and mouthed snow and knew maniac desire. Fool! I thought. He’s dead! Go back!

But what if he is alive, one hour tonight, and I didn’t go to find him?

I was outside town, with no hat or coat, but so warm from running, a salty mask froze my face and flaked away with the jolt of each stride down the middle of an empty road, with the sound of joyous bells blown away and gone.

A wind took me around a final corner of wilderness where a dark wall waited for me.

The cemetery.

I stood by the heavy iron gates, looking numbly in.
The graveyard resembled the scattered ruins of an ancient fort, blown up lifetimes ago, its monuments buried deep in some new Ice Age.

Suddenly, miracles were not possible.

Suddenly the night was just so much wine and talk and dumb enchantments and I running for no reason save I believed, I truly believed, I had felt something happen out here in this snow-dead world. . . .

He remembered.

And he began to melt away. He recalled his body shriveling, his dim heart gone to stillness; the slam of some eternal door of night.

He stood very still in my arms, his eyelids flickering over the stuffs that shifted grotesque furnitures within his head. He must have asked himself the most terrible question of all:
Who has done this thing to me?

He opened his eyes. His gaze beat at me.
You? it said.
Yes, I thought. I wished you alive this night.
You! his face and body cried.

And then, half-aloud, the final inquisition:
“Why . . .?”
Now it was my turn to be blasted and riven.
Why, indeed, had I done this to him?

How had I dared to wish for this awful, this harrowing, confrontation?

What was I to do now with this man, this stranger, this old, bewildered, and frightened child? Why had I summoned him, just to send him back to soils and graves and dreadful sleeps?

Had I even bothered to think of the consequences? No. Raw impulse had shot me from home to this burial field like a mindless stone to a mindless goal. Why? Why?

My father, this old man, stood in the snow now, trembling, waiting for my pitiful answer.

A child again, I could not speak. Some part of me knew a truth I could not say. Inarticulate with him in life, I found myself yet more mute in his waking death.

The truth raved inside my head, cried along the fibers of my spirit and being, but could not break forth from my tongue. I felt my own shouts locked inside.

The moment was passing. This hour would soon be gone. I would lose the chance to say what must be said, what should have been said when he was warm and above the earth so many years ago. Somewhere far off across country, the bells sounded twelve-thirty on this Christmas morn.

Christ ticked in the wind. Snow flaked away at my face with time and cold, cold and time.

Why? my father's eyes asked me; why have you brought me here?

"I—" and then I stopped.

For his hand had tightened on my arm. His face had found its own reason.

This was his chance, too, his final hour to say what he should have said when I was twelve or fourteen or twenty-six. No matter if I stood mute. Here in the falling snow, he could make his peace and go his way.

His mouth opened. It was hard, so dreadfully hard, for him to force the old words out. Only the ghost within the withered shell could dare to agonize and gasp. He whispered three words, lost in the wind.

“Yes?” I urged.

He held me tight and tried to keep his eyes open in the blizzard-night. He wanted to sleep, but first his mouth gaped and whistled again and again:

“... I uvvv yuuuuuuuu . . . !”

He stopped, trembled, wracked his body, and tried to shout it again, failing:

“... I vvv yyy u . . . !”

“Oh, Dad!” I cried. “Let me say it for you!”

He stood very still and waited.

“Were you trying to say I . . . love . . . you?”

“Esssss!” he cried. And burst out, very clearly, at long last: “Oh, yes!”

“Oh, Dad,” I said, wild with miserable happiness, all gain and loss. “Oh, and Pa, dear Pa, I love you.”

We fell together. We held.

I wept.

And from some strange dry well within his terrible flesh I saw my father squeeze forth tears which trembled and flashed on his eyelids.

And the final question was thus asked and answered.

Why have you brought me here?

Why the wish, why the gifts, and why this snowing night?

Because we had had to say, before the doors were shut and sealed forever, what we never had said in life.

And now it had been said and we stood holding each other in the wilderness, father and son, son and father, the parts of the whole suddenly interchangeable with joy.

The tears turned to ice upon my cheeks.

We stood in the cold wind and falling snow for a long while until we heard the sound of the bells at twelve forty-five, and still we stood in the snowing night saying no more—no more ever need be said—until at last our hour was done.

All over the white world the clocks of one a.m. on Christmas morn, with Christ new in the fresh straw, sounded the end of that gift which had passed so briefly into and now out of our numb hands.

My father held me in his arms.
The last sound of the one-o'clock bells faded.
I felt my father step back, at ease now.
His fingers touched my cheek.
I heard him walking in the snow.

The sound of his walking faded even as the last of the crying faded within myself.
I opened my eyes only in time to see him, a hundred yards off, walking.
He turned and waved, once, at me.

The snow came down in a curtain.
How brave, I thought, to go where you go now, old man, and no complaint.
I walked back into town.

I had a drink with Charles by the fire. He looked in my face and drank a silent toast to what he saw there.
Upstairs, my bed waited for me like a great fold of white snow.

The snow was falling beyond my window for a thousand miles to the north, five hundred miles to the east, two hundred miles west, a hundred miles to the south. The snow fell on everything, everywhere. It fell on two sets of footprints beyond the town: one set coming out and the other going back to be lost among the graves.

I lay on my bed of snow. I remembered my father's face as he waved and turned and went away.

It was the face of the youngest, happiest man I had ever seen.

With that I slept, and gave up weeping.

The End