The Wish

by Harris Tobias

The Wish

In the town of Yelm there was a fountain. It was the local custom to toss coins into the fountain while wishing for some heart's desire or other. Whether any of these wishes were ever actually granted is not known but once a custom like this has been started, it is almost impossible to stop. So for years young girls would stop at the fountain and wish for a husband, boys would wish for wives, peasants would wish for a good harvest and merchants would wish for success. School kids would wish for good grades and everyone would wish for good health. Every week the coins were collected by Moishe Barnstock who was charged with the fountain's maintenance.

Moishe was a poor man but an honest one. He would no more consider keeping any of the coins for himself than he would consider robbing a bank. Each week he fished the coins out of the water and set them to dry near the stove. He charged Rivka, his daughter with the task of drying the coins and sorting them. Rivka was a beautiful child but she was born with a twisted leg which gave her a profound limp. Her parents feared that because of her leg, she would never find a husband. When the coins were dry, Moishe brought them to the mayor who thanked him. Moishe assumed that the mayor deposited the coins in the town's bank account but in fact the mayor threw the coins in big jar in his office in effect keeping them for himself.

Now Moishe lived with his wife and daughter in a tiny shack near the town dump. To make ends meet, Moishe's wife, Daphna, took in laundry which she washed in the creek behind their house. On sunny days Daphna hung the laundry out to dry but when it rained, she brought it inside. On those days the house smelled of

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damp clothing and you could hardly turn around without getting slapped in the face by a wet shirt or bed sheet.

Now coins used for wishing are not like coins used to purchase bread or carrots. Coins that have been invested with the magic of hopes and desires are special and have special properties. The difference between wishing coins and ordinary coins is very subtle and cannot be measured by scientific means. But pile up enough of these special coins in one place and strange things happen. Each tiny bit of longing, which cannot be measured by even the most sensitive instruments, adds its magic to the whole until a critical mass is achieved and then the collection of coins becomes desperate to grant a single wish. The collection of wishing coins becomes in effect a potent wish granting source. Such was the condition of the mayor's big jar. It was but a few coins short of this critical mass.

Now it came to pass that one day the mayor was out of town on business. It was the very day that Moishe cleaned the coins from the fountain. Daphna and Rivka were going to town that afternoon to drop off clean laundry and pick up soiled clothes for laundering. “Since you are going to the mayor's house anyway,” said Moishe. “You might as well drop off this bag of coins from the fountain.” After drying them, Rivka tucked the coins into her apron and went with her mother on her rounds. They pulled a heavy hand cart from house to house sometimes dropping off clean laundry and sometimes picking up dirty laundry.

When they arrived at the mayor's house, the mayor's wife, a sour faced old woman, ordered Rivka to gather the dirty clothes piled at each bedroom door. Rivka limped around the big house gathering the piles of linen and bringing them to the cart. She had just delivered the last load when she remembered the little bag of coins. She asked the mayor's wife if she might deliver them to the mayor's office.

“Yes you may, but be quick about it,” said the mayor's wife.

So Rivka went into the mayor's office. She was about to put the bag of coins on his big desk when she noticed the huge jar of coins beside it. It was the wishing coins the mayor had been collecting

over the years. The jar was just a few coins short of that critical mass I was telling you about. The jar was practically glowing with anticipation. Rivka, who had never seen such a great mass of coins, bent down for a closer look. Accidentally she dropped the small bag of coins into the great jar. She was reaching in to fish them out when she heard a voice say,

“And just what do you think you're doing? Don't you dare touch our coins. Take you hand out of there this instant, you little thief.”

“Oh no, mam. I wasn't taking them.”

“Then what were you doing?”

“I was admiring them.”

“I'll bet you wish you could have them though don't you?” asked the mayor's wife who knew how desperately poor Rivka's family was.

“Oh no. That's not what I wish at all,” said Rivka.

“Then what would you wish?”

“I'd wish my mother and father wouldn't have to work so hard,” replied Rivka.

And that was all it took for the jar of coins to unleash their magic. All those pent up wishes were unleashed in a single reality-altering wave. Dozens of things happened but not all at once and not so you would notice. But as Daphna and Rivka began the long walk home Rivka's limp began to disappear. Her twisted foot straightened and before they had covered the first mile, she could walk like a normal girl. Then her face and hair took on a healthy glow making her look even more beautiful that she already was. Her chapped and raw hands healed. Even her patched clothes looked newer and neater. She looked so lovely coming down the road that she caught the eye of the banker's son who happened to be strolling past. He stood aside to let them pass and tipped his hat to Rivka. She blushed and smiled and the boy felt his heart sink into his boots. He followed her home like a love struck puppy.

After a dizzyingly fast courtship, Rivka and the banker's son were married. She soon persuaded her new husband to build a fine house for her parents right next door to their own. Being the son of the richest man in town and hopelessly in love with his new bride he did

as she asked. Daphna no longer had to do laundry and Moishe could study the Talmud all day with the old men at the shul. Some people say it was just dumb luck; others credit the wishing fountain for Rivka's good fortune; some raise their eyes toward heaven and say it was God's will; but we know what it was, don't we?