

## A Box Full of Wishes

by Barry R. Taylor

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The man spoke so softly that Sheldon barely heard him. He was standing in the shadows, hard by the brick wall at the far end of the underground station. Sheldon had just stepped off the last door on the last train of the night. The man said something that Sheldon couldn't make out. It took a few seconds to even find him, so deeply was he buried in the gloom.

Sheldon looked down the platform. The few other passengers were disappearing up the escalators. The station would be closing soon. He turned to leave. The man spoke again, urgency in his voice.

Sheldon turned to look. The man gestured for him to come closer. Sheldon hesitated. Did the surveillance cameras even reach back here? The man was small, and clearly very old. The risk did not seem great. Perhaps he was lost, or destitute, or demented. Compassion compelled him to at least ask.

"What can I do for you, sir?" Sheldon said as he approached. A closer look revealed that the man in the shadows was old indeed. He had a narrow, lined face, a sharp nose and pale blue eyes. A halo of white hair ran below his cloth cap. Once again he said something Sheldon couldn't make out.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to speak up," Sheldon said. "Are you lost? Can I help you find your way?"

The man said, "You . . . good lad. Yes, I can tell. Good lad. You must keep the box." Sheldon leaned in. "Sorry, what? Keep the what?"

"The box. The box full of wishes." He thrust a small wooden box into Sheldon's hands. It was about the size of shoe box, but square, made of some dark wood that Sheldon guessed was oak. Strange symbols and images were carved onto all sides. It wasn't heavy.

"Wait, what's this?" Sheldon said. "I don't want –"

"You must keep the box of wishes," the old man insisted. "I am too old now. I must pass it on. It's a box full of wishes. Yours now."

"A box full of wishes? What does –"

He was interrupted by a recorded voice on the ceiling speakers. "Attention please. This station will close in five minutes. Please exit by the nearest escalator to street level. Service will resume at six a.m. tomorrow."

"Look, sir, I can't keep this," Sheldon said, turning back to the old fellow. "It's not mine and I don't –" He stopped. He was talking to a brick wall. He looked around. Where could the man have gone? The service door in the wall behind him was firmly locked. Sheldon looked down the unlit tunnels where no trains would run until the morning. He could barely make out an old, stooped figure hurrying away down the northbound tunnel. It quickly disappeared into the darkness. Sheldon shook his head. Odd fellow. He tucked the strange box under one arm and headed for the exit.

A half hour later, Sheldon was back in his digs, contemplating the small wooden box sitting on his desk. It was a work of consummate craftsmanship. The symbols and arcana carved on its faces were detailed and beautiful. But what *was* it?

The nameless man in the underground said it was a box full of wishes. Surely he didn't mean that literally? Could he, Sheldon Moss, impoverished graduate student at the London School of Economics (the irony of which was not lost on him) open this box, make a wish, any wish and watch it come true? Could he wish for an order of fish and chips, a decent flat, endless wealth, world peace, or a date with that sultry brunette in his macro-economics seminar, and they would all come true? That seemed unlikely. The world did not give you something for nothing. Economics forbade it.

Any question of what was in the box was moot because he couldn't get it open. The box had no obvious lock or latch. There was nowhere to insert a key, nor any visible hinges. Sheldon had tried pulling straight up on the lid, as if it were a simple pressure fit, to no effect. He tried sliding it off sideways, in all four directions. The box remained closed.

Maybe it was a puzzle box. Maybe the lid could only be opened after one discovered some trick, like a sliding panel, a decoration that rotated, or a recess that appeared when pressed the right way. Maybe the indecipherable arcana inscribed on the box held the key. Sheldon loathed puzzle boxes. They were always much harder to open in real life than in the movies. The hour was late and Sheldon had classes in the morning. He didn't have time for riddles.

Anyway, the old man in the underground hadn't suggested, in their brief conversation, that Sheldon should open the box and make wishes. He said it was a box full of wishes and that Sheldon should keep it. Apparently he was passing it on to a stranger because he was too old, which implied that he had kept it for a long time. If he had wished for anything in all that time, it clearly hadn't been world peace. Maybe he couldn't get the lid open either.

Sheldon yawned. It really was time to turn in. He picked up the box and inspected it one more time. A box full of wishes should be heavier, or so it seemed to him. All that ardent aspiration had to exert some gravity.

He set it back on his desk, atop papers he was supposed to be reading. Economics had no time for wishes. Economics was all about cause and effect. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride, his grandmother used to say. But would a box full of wishes, if such a thing could be real, follow the rules of classical economics? Or even physics? Maybe he was going about this the wrong way.

He picked up the box and set it on the worn hardwood floor. He extended both arms over the box, hands spread, while he canted, "I wish that this box should open!" Feeling foolish already, he reached down and tugged on the lid. It swung open easily. There were interior hinges along one side.

"What the – !" Sheldon exclaimed, taking a step backward. The box was open. Because he wished for it to be so? Was this really a box full of wishes? Could there be such a thing? He approached the box again, nervous now. The inside was dark. Was it empty? He bent over to peer into the blackness. He almost collided with a cluster of artificial flowers coming out.

Sheldon jumped back again. The flowers were attached to a hat, a woven, broad-rimmed hat like those women wore many years ago. The hat, in turn, sat on the head of a middle-aged woman who was growing out of the box as someone appears at the top of an escalator. She seemed to be expanding as she emerged. When she lifted her second side-button shoe from the box she was as large and lively as anyone Sheldon might meet on the street.

"Well now," the woman said briskly. "That's better. Been cooped up in there more than long enough, that's certain." She looked around the room, quietly disapproving. She discovered

Sheldon, who was openly staring at her. “Oh! Hello there, young man. Who would you be now?”

Sheldon looked around for his tongue. “Uhm, uhm, Sheldon. Sheldon Moss.”

“Mrs. Madeline Tyler,” the woman said. She extended a gloved hand, fingers down. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Moss. And thank you for getting me out of there.”

Sheldon shook hands. “You’re . . . welcome?” he tried. There was a lot to process here.

“Help me with the others,” the woman said. She turned and reached down into the box. Her hand came back up gripping the arm of a second woman, who also expanded like a balloon until she was standing beside Mrs. Tyler, inspecting the room with a scowl. She was older and thinner than Mrs. Tyler, but dressed in the same kind of long dress. Her hair was grey. Her hat was pink.

“This is Mr. Moss,” the first woman explained. “He opened the box.”

“Obliged,” the second woman said. “Hester Dundee. Miss.”

Sheldon decided to go with the flow. “Miss Dundee,” he said, nodding. “Why don’t you sit here. Can I . . . get you anything?”

“We’ll get the rest out first,” Mrs. Tyler replied. She was reaching into the box again. She came out with a third woman, also middle-aged, but blonde, and with her hat askew.

“Well thank goodness, finally!” the newcomer exclaimed, stepping into the room. “That was entirely too long with Fiona’s elbow in my face.”

“This is Mr. Moss,” said Miss Dundee. “He opened the box. It appears we are . . . in his bedroom.”

“Oh, oh dear. How . . . discomfiting. Well, hello Mr. Moss. I’m Mrs. Edna Newell.” She too extended a hand. Sheldon shook hands. “I’m sorry I’ve no more chairs,” he said.

Mrs. Tyler was still busy excavating more women from the wishing box. They kept coming and coming. Some were short, some were tall, most were a tad plump, and all were on the north side of forty. By the time she finished, Sheldon’s small bedroom was crowded with middle-aged women dressed for the 1890s. None of them sat on the bed.

“Right then,” Mrs. Tyler said, when the last of her companions was squeezed into the room. “Ladies, this is Mr. Moss, who finally got us out of that awful box.” There were murmurs of gratitude all around. “Mr. Moss, permit me to introduce Miss Trilby Mayflower, Mrs. Gabriella Matins . . .” She continued through all the other women, whose names Sheldon had already forgotten by the time she was through.

“I’m delighted to meet you all,” Sheldon said. “The livingroom would be a little less crowded.”

It was, but only slightly so. By using the sofa, the kitchen chairs, a couple of upturned crates (with cushions) and the chair from his desk, Sheldon managed to get ten of the women seated. Mrs. Tyler and the other two were in the kitchen, trying to find enough cups to serve tea.

Sheldon said, “Perhaps I could ask for an explanation for how you all came to be trapped inside a wooden box. For quite some time, it would seem.”

“It was that awful man, Rev. Cunningham,” declared a stout woman who may or may not have been Mrs. Morrigan O’Leary.

“Reverend, indeed,” snorted Miss Dundee. “The man is no more worthy of reverence than a tree. Claims to be a man of God, he does. The God nor the Goddess would contenance what he did.”

“He was always out to get us, wasn’t he,” another woman took up the tale. “Slandering us from the pulpit, complaining to the police, trying to turn people against us. A truly wicked man.”

“All we wanted was to go about our business,” Mrs. Newell said. “Practice our faith, without malice or mean spirit toward anyone. But Rev. Cunningham wouldn’t tolerate a different way of living, not him. He found an evil spell somewhere, used it to build that wretched box. Then he surprised us when we were all gathered at Madeline’s home.”

Miss Dundee said, “He knew we would all be there, when the moon was full. He used that spell to trap us inside his evil box. Were it not for you, Mr. Moss, we would still be trapped inside.”

“Rev. Cunningham,” Sheldon wondered. “Would he be a thin man, long face, blue eyes, walks with a slight limp?”

“That’s him by the Goddess,” someone said. The others nodded agreement. “Have you met him?”

Revelation shone upon Sheldon. “Yes, I have met him,” he cried. “Now I understand. He gave me a box full of *witches!*”

