

GENE WOLFE

A Cabin on the Coast

The Little People are known to have the power to grant wishes of all sorts, but it is always dangerous for mortals to try to bar-gain with them. Often they will give you what you ask for, but always for a *price*... and sometimes the price will turn out to be a *higher* one than you were willing to pay ...

Gene Wolfe is perceived by many critics to be one of the best—perhaps the best—SF and fantasy writers working today. His most acclaimed work is the tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun*—technically science fiction, but which *feels* enough like fantasy to appeal to most fantasy readers—individual volumes of which have won the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the John W Campbell Memorial Award. His other books include the classic fantasy novels *Peace* and *The Devil in a Forest*, both recently re-released, as well as *Soldier of the Mist*, *Free Live Free*, *Soldier of Arete*, *There Are Doors*, *Castlevision*, *Pandora by Holly Hollander*, and *The Urth of the New Sun*. His short fiction has been collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories*, *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, *The Wolfe Archipelago*, the recent World Fantasy Award-winning collection *Storeys from the Old Hotel*, and *Endangered Species*. His most recent books are part of a popular new series, including *Nightside the Long Sun*, *The Lake of the Long Sun*, and *Calde of the Long Sun*. He has just published a new novel, *Exodus from the Long Sun*.

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IT might have been a child's drawing of a ship. He blinked, and blinked again. There were masts and sails, surely. One stack, perhaps another. If

the ship were really there at all. He went back to his father's beach cottage, climbed the five wooden steps, wiped his feet on the coco mat.

Lissy was still in bed, but awake, sitting up now. It must have been the squeaking of the steps, he thought. Aloud he said, "Sleep good?"

He crossed the room and kissed her. She caressed him and said, "You shouldn't go swimming without a suit, dear wonderful swimmer. How was the Pacific?"

"Peaceful. Cold. It's too early for people to be up, and there's nobody within a mile of here anyway."

"Get into bed then. How about the fish?"

"Salt water makes the sheets sticky. The fish have seen them before." He went to the corner, where a showerhead poked from the wall. The beach cottage—Lissy called it a cabin—had running water of the sometimes and rusty variety.

"They might bite 'em off. Sharks, you know. Little ones."

"Castrating woman." The shower coughed, doused him with icy spray, coughed again.

"You look worried."

"No."

"Is it your dad?"

He shook his head, then thrust it under the spray, fingers combing his dark, curly hair.

"You think he'll come out here? Today?"

He withdrew, considering. "If he's back from Washington, and he knows we're here."

"But he couldn't know, could he?"

He turned off the shower and grabbed a towel, already damp and a trifle sandy. "I don't see how."

“Only he might guess.” Lissy was no longer smiling. “Where else could we go? Hey, what did we do with my underwear?”

“Your place. Your folks’. Any motel.”

She swung long, golden legs out of bed, still holding the sheet across her lap. Her breasts were nearly perfect hemi-spheres, except for the tender protrusions of their pink nipples. He decided he had never seen breasts like that. He sat down on the bed beside her. “I love you very much,” he said. “You know that?”

It made her smile again. “Does that mean you’re coming back to bed?”

“If you want me to.”

“I want a swimming lesson. What will people say if I tell them I came here and didn’t go swimming.”

He grinned at her. “That it’s that time of the month.”

“You know what you are? You’re filthy!” She pushed him. “Absolutely filthy! I’m going to bite your ears off.” Tangled in the sheet, they fell off the bed together. “There they are!”

“There what are?”

“My bra and stuff. We must have kicked them under the bed. Where are our bags?”

“Still in the trunk. I never carried them in.”

“Would you get mine? My swim suit’s in it.”

“Sure,” he said.

“And put on some pants!”

“My suit’s in my bag too.” He found his trousers and got the keys to the Triumph. Outside the sun was higher, the chill of the fall morning nearly gone. He looked for the ship and saw it. Then it winked out like a star.

That evening they made a fire of driftwood and roasted the big, greasy Italian sausages he had brought from town, making giant hot dogs

by clamping them in French bread. He had brought red supermarket wine too; they chilled it in the Pacific. "I never ate this much in my life," Lissy said.

"You haven't eaten anything yet."

"I know, but just looking at this sandwich would make me full if I wasn't so hungry." She bit off the end. "Cuff tough woof."

"What?"

"Castrating woman. That's what you called me this morning, Tim. Now this is a castrating woman."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"You sound like my mother. Give me some wine. You're hogging it."

He handed the bottle over. "It isn't bad, if you don't object to a complete lack of character."

"I sleep with you, don't I?"

"I have character, it's just all rotten."

"You said you wanted to get married."

"Let's go. You can finish that thing in the car."

"You drank half the bottle. You're too high to drive."

"Bullshoot."

Lissy giggled. "You just said bullshoot. Now that's character!"

He stood up. "Come on, let's go. It's only five hundred miles to Reno. We can get married there in the morning."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"If you are."

"Sit down."

“You were testing me,” he said. “That’s not fair, now is it?”

“You’ve been so worried all day. I wanted to see if it was about me—If you thought you’d made a terrible mistake.”

“We’ve made a mistake,” he said. “I was trying to fix it just now.”

“You think your dad is going to make it rough for you—”

“Us.”

“—for us because it might hurt him in the next election.”

He shook his head. “Not that. All right, maybe partly that. But he means it too. You don’t understand him.”

“I’ve got a father myself.”

“Not like mine. Ryan was almost grown up before he left Ireland. Taught by nuns and all that. Besides, I’ve got six older brothers and two sisters. You’re the oldest kid. Ryan’s probably at least fifteen years older than your folks.”

“Is that really his name? Ryan Neal?”

“His full name is Timothy Ryan Neal, the same as mine. I’m Timothy, Junior. He used Ryan when he went into politics because there was another Tim Neal around then, and we’ve always called me Tim to get away from the Junior.”

“I’m going to call him Tim again, like the nuns must have when he was young. Big Tim. You’re Little Tim.”

“Okay with me. I don’t know if Big Tim is going to like it.”

Something was moving, it seemed, out where the sun had set. Something darker against the dark horizon.

“What made you Junior anyway? Usually it’s the oldest boy.”

“He didn’t want it, and would never let Mother do it. But she wanted to, and I was born during the Democratic convention that year.”

“He had to go, of course.”

“Yeah, he had to go, Lissy. If you don’t understand that, you don’t understand politics at all. They hoped I’d hold off for a few days, and what the hell, Mother’d had eight with no problems. Anyway he was used to it—he was the youngest of seven boys himself. So she got to call me what she wanted.”

“But then she died.” The words sounded thin and lonely against the pounding of the surf.

“Not because of that.”

Lissy upended the wine bottle; he saw her throat pulse three times. “Will I die because of that. Little Tim?”

“I don’t think so.” He tried to think of something gracious and comforting. “If we decide we want children, that’s the risk I have to take.”

“You have to take? Bullshoot.”

“That both of us have to take. Do you think it was easy for Ryan, raising nine kids by himself?”

“You love him, don’t you?”

“Sure I love him. He’s my father.”

“And now you think you might be ruining things for him. For my sake.”

“That’s not why I want us to be married, Lissy.”

She was staring into the flames; he was not certain she had even heard him. “Well, now I know why his pictures look so grim. So gaunt.”

He stood up again. “If you’re through eating ...”

“You want to go back to the cabin? You can screw me right here on the beach—there’s nobody here but us.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Then why go in there and look at the walls? Out here we’ve got the fire and the ocean. The moon ought to be up pretty soon.”

“It would be warmer.”

“With just that dinky little kerosene stove? I’d rather sit here by the fire. In a minute I’m going to send you off to get me some more wood. You can run up to the cabin and get a shirt too if you want to.”

“I’m okay.”

“Traditional roles. Big Tim must have told you all about them. The woman has the babies and keeps the home fires burning. You’re not going to end up looking like him though, are you, Little Tim?”

“I suppose so. He used to look just like me.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “He had his picture taken just after he got into politics. He was running for ward committeeman, and he had a poster made. We’ve still got the picture, and it looks like me with a high collar and a funny hat.”

“She knew, didn’t she?” Lissy said. For a moment he did not understand what she meant. “Now go and get some more wood. Only don’t wear yourself out, because when you come back we’re going to take care of that little thing that’s bothering you, and we’re going to spend the night on the beach.”

When he came back she was asleep, but he woke her carrying her up to the beach cottage.

Next morning he woke up alone. He got up and showered and shaved, supposing that she had taken the car into town to get something for breakfast. He had filled the coffee pot and put it on before he looked out the shore-side window and saw the Triumph still waiting near the road.

There was nothing to be alarmed about, of course. She had awakened before he had and gone out for an early dip. He had done the same thing himself the morning before. The little patches of green cloth that were her bathing suit were hanging over the back of a rickety chair, but then they were still damp from last night. Who would want to put on a damp, clammy suit? She had gone in naked, just as he had.

He looked out the other window, wanting to see her splashing in the surf, waiting for him. The ship was there, closer now, rolling like a derelict. No smoke came from its clumsy funnel and no sails were set, but dark

banners hung from its rigging. Then there was no ship, only wheeling gulls and the empty ocean. He called her name, but no one answered.

He put on his trunks and a jacket and went outside. A wind had smoothed the sand. The tide had come, obliterating their fire, reclaiming the driftwood he had gathered.

For two hours he walked up and down the beach, calling, telling himself there was nothing wrong. When he forced himself not to think of Lissy dead, he could only think of the headlines, the ninety seconds of ten o'clock news, how Ryan would look, how Pat—all his brothers—would look at him. And when he turned his mind from that, Lissy was dead again, her pale hair snarled with kelp as she rolled in the surf, green crabs feeding from her arms.

He got into the Triumph and drove to town. In the little brick station he sat beside the desk of a fat cop and told his story.

The fat cop said, "Kid, I can see why you want us to keep it quiet."

Tim said nothing. There was a paperweight on the desk—a baseball of white glass.

"You probably think we're out to get you, but we're not. Tomorrow we'll put out a missing persons report, but we don't have to say anything about you or the senator in it, and we won't."

"Tomorrow?"

"We got to wait twenty-four hours, in case she should show up. That's the law. But kid—" The fat cop glanced at his notes.

"Tim."

"Right. Tim. She ain't going to show up. You got to get yourself used to that."

"She could be . . ." Without wanting to, he let it trail away.

"Where? You think she snuck off and went home? She could walk out to the road and hitch, but you say her stuffs still there. Kidnapped? Nobody could have pulled her out of bed without waking you up. Did you kill her?"

"No!" Tears he could not hold back were streaming down his cheeks.

“Right. I’ve talked to you and I don’t think you did. But you’re the only one that could have. If her body washes up, we’ll have to look into that.”

Tim’s hands tightened on the wooden arms of the chair. The fat cop pushed a box of tissues across the desk.

“Unless it washes up, though, it’s just a missing person, okay? But she’s dead, kid, and you’re going to have to get used to it. Let me tell you what happened.” He cleared his throat.

“She got up while you were still asleep, probably about when it started to get light. She did just what you thought she did—went out for a nice refreshing swim before you woke up. She went out too far, and probably she got a cramp. The ocean’s cold as hell now. Maybe she yelled, but if she did she was too far out, and the waves covered it up. People think drowners holler like fire sirens, but they don’t—they don’t have that much air. Sometimes they don’t make any noise at all.”

Tim stared at the gleaming paperweight.

“The current here runs along the coast—you probably know that. Nobody ought to go swimming without somebody else around, but sometimes it seems like everybody does it. We lose a dozen or so a year. In maybe four or five cases we find them. That’s all.”

The beach cottage looked abandoned when he returned. He parked the Triumph and went inside and found the stove still burning, his coffee perked to tar. He took the pot outside, dumped the coffee, scrubbed the pot with beach sand and rinsed it with salt water. The ship, which had been invisible through the window of the cottage, was almost plain when he stood waist deep. He heaved the coffee pot back to shore and swam out some distance, but when he straightened up in the water, the ship was gone.

Back inside he made fresh coffee and packed Lissy’s things in her suitcase. When that was done, he drove into town again. Ryan was still in Washington, but Tim told his secretary where he was. “Just in case anybody reports me missing,” he said.

She laughed. “It must be pretty cold for swimming.”

“I like it,” he told her. “I want to have at least one more long swim.”

“All right, Tim. When he calls, I’ll let him know. Have a good time.”

“Wish me luck,” he said, and hung up. He got a hamburger and more coffee at a Jack-in-the-Box and went back to the cottage and walked a long way along the beach.

He had intended to sleep that night, but he did not. From time to time he got up and looked out the window at the ship, sometimes visible by moonlight, sometimes only a dark presence in the lower night sky. When the first light of dawn came, he put on his trunks and went into the water.

For a mile or more, as well as he could estimate the distance, he could not see it. Then it was abruptly close, the long oars like the legs of a water spider, the funnel belching sparks against the still-dim sky, sparks that seemed to become new stars.

He swam faster then, knowing that if the ship vanished he would turn back and save himself, knowing too that if it only retreated before him, retreated forever, he would drown. It disappeared behind a cobalt wave, reappeared. He sprinted and grasped at the sea-slick shaft of an oar, and it was like touching a living being. Quite suddenly he stood on the deck, with no memory of how he came there.

Bare feet pattered on the planks, but he saw no crew. A dark flag lettered with strange script flapped aft, and some vague recollection of a tour of a naval ship with his father years before made him touch his forehead. There was a sound that might have been laughter or many other things. The captain’s cabin would be aft too, he thought. He went there, bracing himself against the wild roll, and found a door.

Inside, something black crouched upon a dais. “I’ve come for Lissy,” Tim said.

There was no reply, but a question hung in the air. He answered it almost without intending to. “I’m Timothy Ryan Neal, and I’ve come for Lissy. Give her back to me.”

A light, it seemed, dissolved the blackness. Cross-legged on the dais, a slender man in tweeds sucked at a long clay pipe. “It’s Irish, are ye?” he asked.

“American,” Tim said.

“With such a name? I don’t believe ye. Where’s yer feathers?”

"I want her back," Tim said again.

"An' if ye don't get her?"

"Then I'll tear this ship apart. You'll have to kill me or take me too."

"Spoken like a true son of the ould sod," said the man in tweeds. He scratched a kitchen match on the sole of his boot and lit his pipe. "Sit down, will ye? I don't fancy lookin' up like that. It hurts me neck. Sit down, and 'tis possible we can strike an agreement."

"This is crazy," Tim said. "The whole thing is crazy."

"It is that," the man in tweeds replied. "An' there's much, much more comin'. Ye'd best brace for it, Tim me lad. Now sit down."

There was a stout wooden chair behind Tim where the door had been. He sat. "Are you about to tell me you're a leprechaun? I warn you, I won't believe it."

"Me? One o' them scamperin', thievin', cobblin', little misers? I'd shoot meself. Me name's Daniel O'Donoghue, King o' Connaught. Do ye believe that, now?"

"No," Tim said.

"What would ye believe then?"

"That this is—some way, somehow—what people call a saucer. That you and your crew are from a planet of another sun."

Daniel laughed. "'Tis a close encounter you're havin', is it? Would ye like to see me as a tiny green man wi' horns like a snail's? I can do that too."

"Don't bother."

"All right, I won't, though 'tis a good shape. A man can take it and be whatever he wants, one o' the People o' Peace or a bit o' a man from Mars. I've used it for both, and there's nothin' better."

"You took Lissy," Tim said.

"And how would ye be knowin' that?"

“I thought she’d drowned.”

“Did ye now?”

“And that this ship—or whatever it is—was just a sign, an omen. I talked to a policeman and he as good as told me, but I didn’t really think about what he said until last night, when I was trying to sleep.”

“Is it a dream yer havin’? Did ye ever think on that?”

“If it’s a dream, it’s still real,” Tim said doggedly. “And anyway, I saw your ship when I was awake, yesterday and the day before.”

“Or yer dreamin’ now ye did. But go on wi’ it.”

“He said Lissy couldn’t have been abducted because I was in the same bed, and that she’d gone out for a swim in the morning and drowned. But she could have been abducted, if she had gone out for the swim first. If someone had come for her with a boat. And she wouldn’t have drowned, because she didn’t swim good enough to drown. She was afraid of the water. We went in yesterday, and even with me there, she would hardly go in over her knees. So it was you.”

“Yer right, ye know,” Daniel said. He formed a little steeple of his fingers. “‘Twas us.”

Tim was recalling stories that had been read to him when he was a child. “Fairies steal babies, don’t they? And brides. Is that why you do it? So we’ll think that’s who you are?”

“Bless ye, ‘tis true,” Daniel told him. “‘Tis the Fair Folk we are. The jinn o’ the desert too, and the saucer riders ye say ye credit, and forty score more. Would ye be likin’ to see me wi’ me goatskin breeches and me panpipe?” He chuckled. “Have ye never wondered why we’re so much alike the world over? Or thought that we don’t always know just which shape’s the best for a place, so the naiads and the dryads might as well be the ladies o’ the Deeny Shee? Do ye know what the folk o’ the Barb’ry Coast call the hell that’s under their sea?”

Tim shook his head.

“Why, ‘tis Domdaniel. I wonder why that is, now. Tim, ye say ye want this girl.”

“That’s right.”

“An’ ye say there’ll be trouble and plenty for us if ye don’t have her. But let me tell ye now that if ye don’t get her, wi’ our blessin’ to boot, ye’ll drown.—Hold your tongue, can’t ye, for ‘tis worse than that.—If ye don’t get her wi’ our blessin’, ‘twill be seen that ye weri lrownin’ now. Do ye take me meaning?”

“I think so. Close enough.’

“Ah, that’s good, that is. Now here’s me offer. Do ye remember how things stood before we took her?”

“Of course.”

“They’ll stand so again, if ye but do what I tell ye. ‘Tis yerself that will remember, Tim Neal, but she’ll remember nothin’. An’ the truth of it is, there’ll be nothin’ to remember, for it’ll all be gone, every stick of it. This policeman ye spoke wi’, for instance. Ye’ve me word that ye will not have done it.”

“What do I have to do?” Tim asked.

“Service. Serve us. Do whatever we ask of ye. We’d sooner have a broth of a girl like yer Lissy than a great hulk of a lad like yerself, but then too, we’d sooner be havin’ one that’s willin’, for the unwillin’ girls are everywhere—I don’t doubt but ye’ve seen it yerself. A hundred years, that’s all we ask of ye. ‘Tis short enough, like Doyle’s wife. Will ye do it?”

“And everything will be the same, at the end, as it was before you took Lissy?”

“Not everything. I didn’t say that. Ye’ll remember, don’t ye remember me savin’ so? But for her and all the country round, why ‘twill be the same.”

“All right,” Tim said. “I’ll do it.”

“‘Tis a brave lad ye are. Now I’ll tell ye what I’ll do. I said a hundred years, to which ye agreed—”

Tim nodded.

“—but I’ll have no unwillin’ hands about me boat, nor no ungrateful

ones neither. I'll make it twenty. How's that? Sure and I couldn't say fairer, could I?"

Daniel's figure was beginning to waver and fade; the image of the dark mass Tim had seen first hung about it like a cloud.

"Lay yerself on yer belly, for I must put me foot upon yer head. Then the deal's done."

The salt ocean was in his mouth and his eyes. His lungs burst for breath. He revolved in the blue chasm of water, tried to swim, at last exploded gasping into the air.

The King had said he would remember, but the years were fading already. Drudging, dancing, buying, spying, prying, waylaying and betraying when he walked in the world of men. Serving something that he had never wholly understood. Sailing foggy seas that were sometimes of this earth. Floating among the constellations. The years and the slaps and the kicks were all fading, and with them (and he rejoiced in it) the days when he had begged.

He lifted an arm, trying to regain his old stroke, and found that he was very tired. Perhaps he had never really rested in all those years. Certainly, he could not recall resting. Where was he? He paddled listlessly, not knowing if he were swimming away from land, if he were in the center of an ocean. A wave elevated him, a long, slow swell of blue under the gray sky. A glory—the rising or perhaps the setting sun—shone to his right. He swam toward it, caught sight of a low coast.

He crawled onto the sand and lay there for a time, his back struck by drops of spray like rain. Near his eyes, the beach seemed nearly black. There were bits of charcoal, fragments of half-burned wood. He raised his head, pushing away the earth, and saw an empty bottle of greenish glass nearly buried in the wet sand.

When he was able at last to rise, his limbs were stiff and cold. The dawnlight had become daylight, but there was no warmth in it. The beach cottage stood only about a hundred yards away, one window golden with sunshine that had entered from the other side, the walls in shadow. The red *Triumph* gleamed beside the road.

At the top of a small dune he turned and looked back out to sea. A black freighter with a red and white stack was visible a mile or two out, but it was only a freighter. For a moment he felt a kind of regret, a longing for a

part of his life that he had hated but that was now gone forever. I will never be able to tell her what happened, he thought. And then, Yes I will, if only I let her think I'm just making it up. And then, No wonder so many people tell so many stories. Goodbye to all that.

The steps creaked under his weight, and he wiped the sand from his feet on the coco mat. Lissy was in bed. When she heard the door open she sat up, then drew up the sheet to cover her breasts.

“Big Tim,” she said. “You did come. Tim and I were hoping you would.”

When he did not answer, she added, “He’s out having a swim, I think. He should be around in a minute.”

And when he still said nothing. “We’re—Tim and I—we’re going to be married.”