

Alex thought about a lot of things on his long walks home from the office: Shangri-La, for example, from Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon*, and how his life might pan out there once he'd chosen to stay on; Gemma at work, and whether he really risked asking her out; Céline, and why she had dumped him. And sometimes – more frequently than he would like to admit – what he should say to the fairy who would surely materialise in his path one day, offering to grant him a wish. Occasionally, he even made a decision. In the case of the fairy, for instance, he reckoned that, although in theory you could probably ask for anything, you really ought to put some kind of restraint on yourself, or else you'd go crazy. And, of course, you had to get the wording right.

So when it actually happened – when a young, white-robed woman, pale within her silvery aura, appeared in front of him in Regent's Park near dusk one day in June – he stood quite still and resolute, despite the tear of sweat that rolled down his forehead and into his eye.

“Relax and listen,” she said in a soft transatlantic tone. “I have the power to grant you any wish you choose. I don't want to put you under any pressure, but you've got ten seconds to think and then twenty seconds to speak. After that, I touch you on the shoulder with my wand and off I go again.” She accompanied this last part with a raised fist and puff-of-smoke gesture of flicking out her fingers. But Alex was ready.

“I want to be able to return instantly,” he replied, “to any spot in the world I've previously visited just by thinking of it and saying ‘Let's travel' aloud, and then tapping my left knee three times. And I can take one person with me if I'm holding their hand, and come back in the same way. Above all, let the wish happen as I intend it to.”

Anyone, thought Alex, who'd travelled down the same mental side roads as he had would appreciate the contractual nature of his wish. With the spoken instruction and the knee touching, he was on the double authorisation track: what he didn't want was some idle daydream sending

him to the bit of Nile he'd once travelled down in a cruise ship, only to find that the boat had long since departed, and there he would be, treading water gamely, waiting for a pair of crocodile eyes to break the surface. And the last part, about it happening the way he intended it, was to make sure he didn't get any of that *Monkey's Paw* nonsense where he was whisked safely away to the Mexican pyramids, but re-entered London as a corpse or with his limbs hanging off.

Anyhow, the fairy showed no signs of making a value judgement. "Have you finished?" was all she said, tiptoeing towards him.

Alex couldn't resist. "Unless you could throw in an aphrodisiac that would make women faint with desire for me," he added. Instead of a reply, he felt the wand lightly descend on his shoulder. After that, he didn't really feel anything at all.

When he came to, somewhere towards dawn, the dew seeping cold into his shirt and a few bright stars above him, Alex had absolutely no idea where he was. His first thought was Tuscany, where he'd drunk half a bottle of grappa at the age of eleven and collapsed in a wood till nightfall. Propping himself up on his elbows, he made a brief inspection of his body, checking first that his feet were upright and the standard length from his head. It was only when he turned onto his side that he recalled the electrical charge from the wand, tearing its way through his chest like a small bolt of lightning, setting his lungs on fire and, unless his mind was playing tricks on him, flinging his limbs about in an abbreviated tribal dance.

He got onto his knees amongst the waist-height shrubbery he must have crawled into, looking over the top at what he guessed were the streetlights of Camden. Then he leant forward to let the retching begin.

*I'm still alive* was his first thought as the evening sun swung low through the bedroom window. Burying his head in the pillow, he spent the next ten minutes trying to arrange snatches of memory into a sequence that might explain how he'd got back. Mostly he recalled the people he had passed: guys in T-shirts going home from clubs half-wrecked but bright-eyed, or blokes in caps and jackets whose jobs brought them out onto the streets unhappily early. Perhaps he'd attracted their attention in turn by looking both shattered *and* miserable. Anyway, he had certainly walked all the way home, guided by magnetic north or the pole star and therefore turning left at key points rather than right or climbing a hill instead of crossing a road,

until he had made his way through two or three London boroughs to his own front door.

As for the primary incident, the folds of white muslin and the transatlantic tones, he deliberately kept the lid on that. It seemed obvious he had had some kind of hallucinatory blackout brought on by working too hard and then drinking outside the pub with his workmates, but he would be able to explore the implications of all that later. For the moment he focused on recovery – on shopping, cooking, and watching a film on telly.

So it wasn't until eleven that he finally made his way through the kitchen, picking up a Coke on the way, adding ice from the cobalt-blue fridge-freezer his landlord had recently installed, and opening the door onto the dark garden to let the memory in. Maybe he was still in shock, but it seemed important to lay out all the possibilities in a scientific way. After a few sips of his drink, he decided he was ready.

The first and overwhelmingly likely option was a drunken fall, during which he had had an unusually vivid dream. The second, more disturbing, was a waking hallucination followed by some kind of seizure. In the third scenario, the fairy was a complete impostor, a strange park person whose personal goals you wouldn't care to examine, and his blackout was coincidental. Fourthly, he reckoned, after a gulp from his glass, the rules of the universe do in fact offer more latitude than we allow and a real fairy appeared in front of him and granted him a wish, causing him to stumble in shock. And fifthly, the fourth option, except she got the granting bit wrong in some way – was a novice, perhaps, or only pretended to grant him a wish, while maliciously electrocuting him.

He went to bed.

“God, you look awful,” said Bill.

This was Sunday, the next day.

“Well, I feel bit wrecked,” said Alex.

“You look terrible. Really sort of puffy.”

“I *am* a bit under the weather at the moment.”

“Yes, you must be. Your skin is manky, like it's been marinated in seawater, or you've been found in the river.”

Alex felt a throb at his temple. “You've made your point, Bill. In fact, you've hewn it from the rock, chiselled and sculpted it, and put it on public display.”

They were in Chinatown on Gerrard Street in the first rain for weeks, passing the Royal Dragon with its sweet, hot breath of plum sauce, and the Chinese supermarket with its strange-looking vegetables outside, pale swollen marrows and mushrooms like tumours.

Bill was a friend from schooldays – handsome, blustery – and they were going to see an old arthouse movie, pre-1980 being their preferred option for all films. Both of them were committed to the genre, too, returning to it time after time despite, or rather because of, some epically boring sequences, including one at the Curzon Bloomsbury that had featured a distant silhouette of Bedouins with their camels inching their way across the width of the screen, no music or any other form of action for at least three minutes.

“So what have you been doing?” asked Bill.

Alex wasn’t sure whether he meant in general or to cause his creased grey skin. “Very little,” he replied, not being ready to share his incident in the park.

They walked on and got a beer at the cinema.

“Bill?” asked Alex, when they were nearing the end of their conversation. “Have you ever thought what you would choose if you were granted any wish?”

“Yes.”

No hesitation. So everyone actually *does* go about getting ready for their fairy encounter, thought Alex. But Bill looked serious. “I would always be able to score a goal,” he said, “within ten minutes of going on in any football match.” He drank some more beer, still serious. “England, for example, would know they could always rely on me to put one in, but I wouldn’t need to be particularly fit. I could even take up smoking. I’d only stay on for the ten minutes, and the opposition, of course, would put five men on me. That would be part of the fun. I’d still score somehow. Always.”

They shared a moment of awe. Then Bill returned the question out of politeness. The film was about to start.

“I’d ask for another three wishes,” replied Alex, getting up. Bill grimaced – appropriately, as his companion had to admit.

An ordinary five days followed in Alex’s life. For ordinary, of course, read excessive. Too much of working too hard, of watching TV, of googling and Facebook, of red wine, of envy and regret, of rage, of depression and absurd elation, of lying, of drawing up a list and carrying only one thing out, of imagining escape. Too much *pointless* thinking.

When Alex was a child, his adoptive father would get home at four on a Sunday, after visiting his parishioners. If it was a rainy day or winter, Alex and a friend would be messing about with a toy train set or a racing track, and his father, a tall man with a short back and sides, and a grey fringe that flopped over his forehead, would come in with a tea tray, acknowledge them with a smile, and sit down at the table. Picking up a white loaf, he'd butter the cut end and slice off a piece an inch thick, spooning on jam and spreading a thin layer, his slicing arm making shadows on the wall. But what Alex remembered most was the deliberateness of his movements and his simple need for food. The *only* thing he was up to in his head, it seemed, was having his tea.

Alex, at least, had postponed any further examination of the incident in the park. Now, as a murmur of anticipation rippled its way through the queue outside the surgery, he turned to watch Dr Patel getting out of his old, well-kept (by his son) Bentley. Unbuttoning his topcoat while grinding a half-smoked cheroot into the pavement, the GP strode towards the door.

One hour and forty-five minutes later, Alex was sitting opposite him. Though he had planned his overall strategy, Alex was immediately wrongfooted by the generosity of the doctor's opening gambit: "And how are you doing in overall terms, Mr Harrison?"

Alex ran a hand through his hair. "I'm fine, I think. I'm trying to cut back on the drinking."

"Really? What are you aiming for?"

"A single glass of wine in the evening. When I'm at home. Or a Coke instead."

"Before or after the beer?" said the doctor with a smile. "Anyhow, what are you here for today?"

Alex cleared his throat.

"Bit of a cough, is it?"

"No."

"Or the guts playing up?"

"No."

"Oh, I see." He smiled and shook his head. "The dick is it, then? You young chaps. Let's have a look, shall we?"

For a moment, Alex might have stood up. "No, it's nothing like that. But I think I had a blackout on my way home through the park."

The doctor looked serious. "And *had* you been on the liquor?"

"Not really. No more than a couple of pints."

The medic narrowed his eyes. “Well then, are you sure your booze wasn’t laced by a chum? I heard of that the other day.”

“I don’t think so. I had a kind of hallucination, though.”

“Go on.”

“I saw a woman. She appeared in front of me, but she didn’t seem quite right. She looked odd. Then I woke up on the ground a bit later, feeling pretty sick.”

Dr Patel stroked his chin. While he clearly wasn’t about to enter into a lengthy discussion on the subject, he wasn’t dismissing it either. After getting up and taking Alex through one or two balance-and-grit-your-teeth checks, he reached for his computer mouse.

“We’ll send you for a hospital test. Report to reception, please, old man,” said the GP, adding, when Alex got to the door, “Cut down on the beer, Mr Harrison, or change your friends. That’s my advice.”

Back at his flat after a brief swim and some listless cycling at the gym, Alex got himself a glass of white wine and sat in the window chair. The garden itself was half in sunlight and half in shade. Idly, he started to think about some of the places abroad he had visited. More particularly, he started scanning his mind for precise locations that were likely to be deserted. He tried visualising himself in several of these, sitting comfortably on grass or sand.

In the end he settled on a small patch of beach on the Arabian sea near a port in Oman. He had had the good luck to stay in the hotel close by as the work experience member of a team bidding to design a spa resort, and had gone for early walks along this stretch of shore, hot even before breakfast. All you might see was a man on a camel a mile or so away, fuzzy like Omar Sharif in *Lawrence of Arabia*, or a colony of small birds with long legs, darting around and attempting to spear baby crabs on their beaks. The sea, surprisingly, was grey and boomed and crashed as if it were a Cornish tide.

He could have thought of somewhere less exotic, perhaps. He could even have pictured himself on the bed in the room next door, though somehow it seemed unsporting. So he picked up his phone, and googled the time difference. Plus four hours. This meant he would need to be ready at three in the morning. After cooking some dinner, he dozed off for a while, had a shower, and watched a movie on Netflix.

Alex knew he was about to rule out an option he shouldn't even have entertained. The blackout must have unhinged him. In the country of the mind, he had allowed the terrorist campaign against reason to pull off a victory. But what if there *were* curves in the logic of the universe, and every billionth person encountered one, say, every hundred years? And what if we dressed these abstract curves in commonplace images such as fairies?

Alex put on his backpack, picked up his passport, checked he had thirty quid in his wallet, and looked at the time, which was coming up to three. So he sat, breathed in, and holding the image of the beach in his mind, said, "Let's travel." And he tapped his left knee three times.

Afterwards, for a moment or two, he surveyed the flat, as if the walls themselves might dissolve into sand and the view of the garden turn to grey sea. Then, trying to bury a feeling of shame, he got up, his rucksack still on his back, and made his way through the kitchen, picking up a carton of milk on the way and opening the door to the garden for a draught of night air. Somewhere in the bushes at the end of the lawn, there was a rustling sound. A fox, perhaps, or his neighbour's fat tabby. Alex took a long pull of milk. Soon he would go to bed, unpacking his bag and finishing off the *Modesty Blaise* novel Bill had lent him.

The moment he had returned the carton to the fridge, however, a great pressure pushed its way into the room from the garden behind him like a wave, forcing his face and chest into the blue metallic door. And before he could turn, his wrists had been seized, and the pressure began to ebb, pulling him backwards across the kitchen floor, a sticky, sucking sound of shingle in his ears.

"Help!" he shouted, though most of the air had left his lungs.

When he reached the garden, the door slamming shut behind him, Alex was thrust face down onto the grass, a knee, or what felt like one, on his backpack, and muscular hands at his wrists once more, this time stretching his arms upwards and outwards to the sky until he thought the tendons would snap. As his mouth filled with saliva, Alex closed his eyes against the pain.

When he opened them again, extreme cold was the first thing he registered, an oncoming wind that wanted to flay the skin off his face; and afterwards a roaring, hurtling motion, as if he had been flung onto a mattress in the back of a speeding, open-top truck. But all he could actually see was blackness, pinpointed with golden light.

Finally the wind dropped, and he was tumbling downwards through the night sky, as though the truck had tipped its load over a monstrous cliff. And after a while, that too stopped, and Alex seemed to be floating now, face upwards on a dark liquid, thicker and warmer than seawater. As he lay there, flickering images began to appear above him, projected onto the dark sky, scenes from his past life, episodes when he had been the cause of pain or minor wanton cruelty. Some of the images he already knew to be significant. Others gained significance by being there now. And with each one, it felt as if a brick had been placed on his chest.

Just when it seemed as if his ribs might crack under the pressure, the weight was taken away and there was a moment of oblivion, followed by a sensation he recognized but hadn't experienced since childhood – of waking in the holidays with the sun pushing at closed curtains and not feeling bad, not feeling guilty, about anything.

A warm wind was blowing, and, realizing his eyes were glued with sleep, Alex picked and rubbed at the corners to let in the first grey glimmer of morning light. Putting his right hand out onto what he thought might be his bed, he felt sand instead and beyond it heard the sound of birds and breaking waves.

Alex knows him now as Burhan but then, on the beach, he appeared in front of him a stranger with his beard and gold-rimmed glasses, his brown V-neck jumper (thin at the elbows), his barrel belly and plump fingers, saying in English with a slight Arabic accent, "Hello, my friend. Have you spent the night on the beach? Were you washed up from the briny? Were you spat out by a whale?"

"No," said Alex, his arms still stiff and painful, "But I think I must have fallen asleep for a moment."

Burhan put his plastic bag on the sand and sat beside him on a rock. "Where are you staying? At the Holiday Inn?"

Alex improvised: "Actually, I've just flown in from Muscat for a couple of days. I was planning to find somewhere in town."

"You look rather done in. Are you all right?"

"A bit tired, that's all."

"Well, that's fine. After a journey. Would it do you good to walk?"

For a while they made their way along the beach in silence, Burhan padding along by Alex's side, left shoulder forward and then right, like a sumo wrestler on a day off, his face at rest settling into a grin. Alex meanwhile felt strange and mad, having travelled several thousand miles across the world on a mattress.

Finally Burhan said, "In a moment we'll turn inland, shall we, into the town? Have you been to the town yet?"

"Not this trip."

"Ah. An old hand, back for another visit." Alex nodded. "You would have seen the fish market last time," continued Burhan, "and you would have bought a small plastic container of frankincense, which you burned a few times for your friends when you got home. The remainder is now in a drawer with similarly redundant exotica."

Alex had recovered enough to feel slightly irritated by this remark, and Burhan seemed immediately to know. In the sea of human interaction, Alex

later decided, Burhan was always lowering a sail or inching the tiller to port or starboard.

“I’ll show you something different, anyway, if I may,” concluded his companion.

They followed a track that led from the beach through a plantation of coconut trees. Soon they were on the outskirts of the town. Burhan took Alex along a series of back streets with shuttered sand-coloured buildings on either side. Alex caught sight in passing of a small shaded courtyard with tiled walls, a dry fountain, and a plant with spear-like leaves. They came to a junction in the road. Burhan pointed to the left, “My house is down that way. I have a wife and five children. It keeps me out of trouble. Mostly.” He smiled, looked at Alex, and added, “However, *we* are going this way.”

After a few minutes, they turned into a dark passageway, no more than the breadth of two men or Burhan alone, who now walked ahead. At the end was a wide paved square in bright sunlight, the left-hand border formed by a high windowless building with an open stone staircase at its side, which they climbed until they reached a landing near the top.

Burhan took a key out of his generous trouser pocket and opened a wooden door into a dark corridor that smelt of damp leaves. As his eyes adapted, Alex could see shelves of leather-bound books on either side. Turning right, they entered a day-lit room, a long narrow window on its left. This space was also lined with books, and there were maps lying open on a reading table. Burhan beamed. “Welcome to my library,” he said.

Alex was invited to remove his rucksack and look around while his host took two loaves of bread from his plastic bag and made tea on a small stove. Most of the books were in Arabic, but some were in English. The one Alex pulled out seemed to be a grammar. Between the shelves were stacks of rolled-up charts. Burhan gestured Alex to a wooden chair opposite the window and gave him his tea in a glass.

Pointing at a nearby set of a dozen dark-blue volumes, Alex said, “May I ask what *those* books are about?”

“They’re commentaries on religious texts.”

“On Islam?”

“Not just Islam. On Christianity too. And Judaism.”

Burhan sipped his tea and looked up at Alex. “And what is your field?”

“I’m an architect in London. Still training, really.”

“How interesting. And you’re in Muscat on business?”

“With some free time, yes,” replied Alex, glancing sidelong at the window. “Have you always lived in Salalah?” he asked, wanting to change the subject.

“No, not quite,” replied Burhan, smiling. “When I was a child, my father took the family to France, where we had some relatives. He thought we’d all do better there.”

“And did you?” said Alex, feeling it was all right to ask.

“Yes, I suppose you could say that. For a while, anyway. He joined a small Arab trading company in Paris. A family concern, set up by our cousin, Faroukh.” Burhan put his tea down. “My father was rather a timid man, in fact. Moving to France may have been the only courageous act of his life. But perhaps his timidity or even his silence was seen as wisdom. People trusted him, and they trusted his advice. So yes, he – and we – did quite well. Soon he was responsible for the onward despatch of any particularly valuable items, works of art and things like that.”

They chatted on for a time, Alex describing his previous visit to Salalah, and Burhan telling him about his postgraduate research in London and his lectureship in English and linguistics at a college outside Salalah.

“So you’ve returned to your home town,” said Alex in the pause that followed.

“Yes, like a salmon. Even to the house I was born in.”

“Did your parents come back too?”

Burhan filled his empty tea glass with water from the jug on the table. “Actually, my father went missing in Paris, and after a year or so we gave up hope. It seemed better to bring the rest of the family back to Oman.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alex. “What happened?”

Burhan shrugged. “My mother and sisters had gone to London to visit some old Omani friends, so my father was looking after me. I got home after school one day to find the apartment door already open and no one inside. So I sat on the sofa and waited for him, but he never returned, and I haven’t seen him since. This is thirty-five years ago. No one has seen him since.”

“And your mother?”

“She never gave up hope, though she died last year.”

Alex half yawned, despite himself, and Burhan smiled. “You look as if you need some rest.”

Alex nodded. “It *was* a very early flight.”

“Well, I may have a solution to that,” Burhan said, “and to your accommodation problem in general. My cousin has a very small, very simple

place a few minutes from here. He's gone to Muscat for a week. He'd be happy to know you were a guest there." Burhan read Alex's doubtful expression. "Of course, I'll call him this evening to let him know."

Alex balanced caution against fatigue, fear of what might happen on his return 'flight', and the possibility that any hotel he approached would ask to see his visa. "I can only stay a day or two..."

"Well, that's fine. Why don't you put a loaf of bread in your rucksack and bring your tea?"

At the other end of the library, a back door with a window opened onto some metal steps, a wide flat roof and, beyond that, desert as far as the horizon. Screwing his eyes against the sun, Alex followed his companion's diagonal path to the far side of the roof where, after stepping over a low wall onto the top of the next building, they found themselves by a wooden fence with a narrow gate. Burhan motioned him through, saying, "This is my cousin's property."

The rooftop dwelling ahead of them looked as though it had been constructed over a long weekend. Outside there was a yard with cactus plants, a washing line, and a large tarpaulin for shade; inside, a caravan-style kitchenette, a dark bedroom through an arched doorway, and a bathroom with a rigged-up shower and sloping concrete floor.

Burhan showed Alex how things worked, gave him a key, and told him where the nearest food store was. After that he left, saying he would look by and collect him when he came over to the library at seven that evening.

Alex woke after a long sleep, took a cold shower, made some tea, and set his watch to local time. Then he went outside into the yard, chewing a piece of bread. Beyond the shelter of the tarpaulin, the afternoon heat was an entity in itself, pushing down on the roof of the house.

*So that's it. There are curves in the universe, and I have stumbled into one.*

But what had happened to his carefully rehearsed wish? He certainly hadn't *intended* to be beaten up in his garden or dropped into a warm, syrupy sea. Nor had he asked for a cinematic review of his past misdemeanours. Should he attempt to summon the fairy back, or would that just invite another blast from her wand? And when would he dare to use his power again?

Alex walked farther out into the sunlight, where a slight breeze had got up. The questions could wait. Surely it was time to look at the positives? Whatever else, he *had*, more or less, been granted his wish. So he decided

to remind himself of the some of the things he had fantasized about on his way home from work – the joy of being able to take a walk in the Alps on a wet UK Sunday afternoon, or to sip an aperitif of chilled Californian wine in *California* before supper in London. The sheer kudos, though it would take a bit of explaining, of transporting a girlfriend to Xian for an evening stroll along the city walls.

Financial gain? He'd have to do some more work on that. Obviously he could sign up for a tour of a bank vault or something similar, returning at night to lob a few ingots into his rucksack. You still had to be careful, though, with DNA and CCTV. Not that a prison could hold him, of course, but did he really want to become a kind of outlaw ghost, unable to touch down on familiar soil for more than an hour at a time?

Perhaps he should settle instead for the quiet joy of a superhero's self restraint? But if he *was* going down that avenue, would he need to draw up some kind of code? Should he think, say, about using his powers exclusively for the public good, or might that become rather dreary?

Alex walked past the yard's largest half-cracked pot and looked out across the desert. He was a 'curver' now. For the moment that was enough.

After getting some currency in town, changing his SIM card – he'd need to ring in sick the following morning – and looking up the times of return flights to Muscat in a café with Wi-Fi, Alex clambered back up the spiral fire escape on the other side of the cousin's flat to wait for Burhan to arrive, watching from the yard as the sun made its final, rapid descent into the desert.

At half past seven, assuming his new friend had become absorbed in a book or a map, he decided to wander over to the library himself, retracing his steps in the dark until he could make out the dimly lit window of the building's back door. Reaching up from the metal steps, he tapped on the glass and waited, turning to look over at the nightscape of Salalah, reckoning he could identify the floodlit, palm-fringed pool of the Holiday Inn, down by the beach. When there was no response, he climbed onto the final step and peered in.

The room was in chaos: the table overturned, charts and papers covering the floor.

Alex paused and then pushed his way in, stumbling over a pile of books, the kerosene lamp swinging in the wind until he had pulled the door shut behind him. It was only as he crossed the room, uprighting a jug by the sink,

that he noticed the leg in the far corner, stretched out across the entrance to the corridor. Alex rushed over, Burhan groaning when he reached him, and lifting himself onto his elbows, before collapsing again.

Alex knelt by his side. "Are you all right?"

Burhan nodded. "Could you get me a glass of water, please?"

By the time Alex had found a tumbler and struggled with the sink's rusty tap, his companion had risen onto his knees, into the light of the main room, a trickle of blood at his temple. "Thank you," he said, taking a huge gulp and looking around him. "I had a visit, I'm afraid, from two rather overexcited gentlemen."

"What did they want?"

"Some information, which I didn't give them, and access to the paperwork in my library, which, after a bit of a struggle, I couldn't refuse them. But they won't have found anything."

Alex took his glass and helped him to the seat by the window. "Are you going to call the police?" he asked.

Burhan shook his head. "This is something I need to deal with myself. The end of the story, I hope," he said, looking around him. "They won't come back, by the way, the men, at least for a while."

"Can I help you tidy up, then?" asked Alex, wondering what the hell he had got himself into.

Burhan smiled. "Thank you. But afterwards you must go back to my cousin's and forget about all this. Enjoy the beach and return to Muscat."

At any other time, Alex would certainly have agreed. But today was different.

"No," he replied. "I want to hear your story."

