



Reluctant Press

A Birthday Wish

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. DIAMOND

A 'SPECTRUM' NOVEL

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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Prelude

My name is Twinkle and I am a Birthday Fairy. No, I am the only Birthday Fairy now that Farrell retired. Being a Birthday Fairy is not as easy as it once was. The cut backs in staffing levels and the new regulations we need to comply with makes the job nearly impossible.

And the `Boss'! She wants the magic all used up so she can justify getting more when it comes time to do the new budget. She would have made a great slave driver.

The rules and regulations (I hate rules and regulations) require that only so much magic can be used at one time. As if it really makes sense to grant a wish like, "I want a Barbie Doll for my birthday." Especially when the kid is getting one, anyway.

I came up with a method of using up the magic and making it look like I have followed the regulations. Each time I come upon a birthday wish that would be granted before I got there, I save up the magic for the next wish. One wish is not very powerful, but after four or five... let us just say, look out.

I am not hurting anyone giving them what they asked for. Besides, the new Mark IV computer really grants the wishes these days. I just feed in the information and it happens. Farrell always checked the computer output. I never understood why. Computers can't make mistakes. And the Mark IV is the newest of the new.

As far as what birthday wishes are, well that is easy. Every time you blow out the candles on your cake, you make a birthday wish. If the wish gets through and doesn't hurt anyone else, then I can grant the wish. No wishing that your boss would drop dead, it won't work (I know, I have tried).

Birthday wishes come in all types and sizes. Take the case of...

Grumpy Old Man

By Gerri Becken

“Life is wasted on the young.” I thought, again. I was nearly ninety—years—old. Most of my life was behind me. I was retired from work. Most of my friends were dead or had moved away. My family was all elsewhere, my kids more worried about their grandchildren than their father.

I was living in a retirement home. Here, I could pretend to be on my own, even if I really wasn't. My actions were monitored to ensure that nothing happened to me. My meals were prepared to be healthy, with no real consideration being provided for the taste of the food.

Certain times during the day were set aside for group activities. During those times I was to attend, even if I didn't wish to attend. The choice of activities was limited and, if I was lucky, just plain boring. If I wasn't lucky, it was much worse.

“Life is wasted on the young.”

My mind was as sharp as ever. This, coupled with my failing body, was nearly intolerable. As most of the others who shared Ocean Breezes adult community possessed both failing physical and mental health, it was worse.

The over worked staff tried to be nice and friendly with those of us that I called the “inmates”. There was just too little time to spend more than a couple of minutes with each of us individually.

Mary Worth was a dedicated Nurse Practitioner. She was about half my age, the single mother of two daughters, age fourteen and twelve.

Of the entire staff, she seemed to be the only one who knew that I was still in full possession of my mind. She did try to spend as much time with me as she could. Even her best was far too little but I appreciated her effort.

Over the past year I had learned much about her family. Some of what I had learned, was not public knowledge. Mary had lost her first child, a girl of less than two weeks to S.I.D.S.

I also knew that Mary's husband had left her with two baby girls for a much younger woman. He had died in a plane crash as he was leaving the country with a sexy seventeen—year—old girl.

He had withdrawn all of their savings and cashed in the life insurance policies to pay for the trip and left Mary with nothing but debts. Her girls only knew that their father had died in a plane crash when they were very young.

I suspected that, besides Mary, only I knew these facts. Of course, others could find it out from various records.

“Mr. Jennings,” Mary said entering my room. “Why aren't you in the common room for bingo?”

“I hate bingo. It is about as stimulating as watching grass grow. I want to use my mind, not turn it off. I would rather stay in my room and play a game of chess against the computer,” I said.

“I can't let you do that. Whenever the computer beats you, your blood pressure goes up,” Mary explained to me.

“I would rather go out playing chess than bingo,” I said in a foul mood.

“What if I promise to not get excited if the computer wins a game?”

“That won't work. You always get too excited when the computer wins.”

“Can't I bring the chess game to the common room and play there?”

“I am afraid that Mr. Berkeley will not allow that. He cares about you and the other patients here.”

“He only cares that we continue to live so he gets paid for putting us up in this prison, and that he doesn't need to fill out the paper work when one of us dies.”

“That is not true. Mr. Berkeley does to care about you... and you know it. This is one of the best adult care communities in the state.”

“It being the best doesn't mean that it is any good!” I said.

I knew it was one of the best in the state, even the nation. I knew that I was lucky to be in such a good *home*. Still, it left a lot to be desired.

“Now come on Mr. Jennings, let me help you to the common room,” Mary said, being nice to me.

“Damn it all. I may not be as healthy as you, but I am not on my death bed. I can make it to the common room, if I want.”

"I don't doubt you can, but if you don't let me help you, then Brutus will be here to help you; and you know what that means."

I knew what it meant. Brutus was a giant of a man. He was as weak mentally as he was strong physically. He would not hurt a fly but otherwise did whatever Mr. Berkeley told him to do.

I let Mary help me to the common room. I left my chess game behind. "*Life is wasted on the young.*"

In the common room, I was seated next to George Mitchell and Henry Wilson. These two were closest to being my friends in the entire center. Unfortunately, I figured between the two of them, they had half a brain; and they were two of the smarter ones here.

"Jolly good show, you showing up just in time, Jennings old boy," Henry Wilson said to me.

He was no more English than I was. However, he liked to think he was.

"Where else would he be, Wilson?" George Mitchell said. "If we ain't dead, we are here." Mitchell didn't like anything and let everyone know it.

The two of them were often the center of attention when they both managed to get their dander up. The head nurse, Susan St. George, knew this and didn't want them to get into it right now.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. We are about to begin our game. Does everyone have their bingo cards?"

Everyone didn't. There was the usual confusion as the staff moved through the room helping the "inmates" with their cards.

Finally, things settled down and Susan began to call out the various letters and numbers for bingo.

"B 5," she began. "B 5."

"Bingo!" Came the shout from the rear of the room. Alice Jamenson had called bingo after the first number was called.

This brought about some cat calls from some of the more aware "inmates" as they began to heap comments on Alice for calling bingo too soon.

"*This is so thrilling, I could just shit,*" I thought to myself. "*How could anyone find this even remotely exciting?*"

Somehow I made it through the hour. As was common, we were able to complete only one short game and start a second before the time ran out.

The staff began to help others back to their rooms. I noticed Billy Joe Franklin begin to wander toward the front door. Billy Joe thought he was a prisoner of war in an

enemy P.O.W. camp. He often used confusion at times like this to try to escape. If I called out to stop him, he would be mad at me. Yet, if he got out he might be hurt.

I decided the best course of action was to get someone else to finger him. I hobbled over to Alice Jamenson and whispered in her, "Billy Joe is going out dancing. If you hurry, you can go with him." I then moved away.

Alice Jamenson was slower than most. It took her a full minute to understand what I had said. It then took her another two minutes to decide that she wanted to go as well. At that point, Billy Joe was almost to the front door.

Alice Jamenson looked around and noticed Billy Joe. She then shouted out to him, "Billy Joe, wait for me. Don't leave without me." This caused the staff to notice Billy Joe and guide him back to his room.

As they did so, he repeated over and over, "Franklin, William J., Corporal, 234—87—2468."

I felt sorry for Billy Joe, and the rest of the people here. They all deserved better than they got. I guess I knew that Mr. Berkeley was really trying to give us a good place to live. It just wasn't possible to provide the kind of support that was needed on the money he received. Many of the people here were not very well off. It was old age conspiring against us.

"Life is wasted on the young."

My room was really one of the better rooms in the place. It came from making several really good investments when I was younger. I could not be considered one of the *filthy rich* but I was much better off than most people.

Most of my money was to go to my family when I died. In their own way they loved and cared about me. But they didn't need the money that much, either.

My children were nearing retirement age themselves and had good retirement plans. They could take good care of their kids and grandchildren.

I had decided that I would leave an endowment to my college, another to Ocean Breezes, and then set up a fund to help Mary send her daughters to college.

Both were bright girls, if not a little wild. They need someone to set an example for them, someone that doesn't work twelve hour days for eight hours of pay.

My room was filled with books, my computer equipment, and the rest of my merger belongings. The view was of the beach.

During the summer months I could wish as I watched the young kids play in the surf. But at nearly ninety, I was almost too old to remember what I might be wishing for. *"Life is wasted on the young."*

I stumbled into my room. My body was not able to take much in the way of exercise or excitement. The short walk from the common room to my room was nearly enough to wear me out.

I could remember in my youth being able to walk for miles and miles without even getting tired. Now a hundred meters was more than I could handle. "*Life is wasted on the young.*"

"Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday, Mr. Jennings. Happy Birthday to you."

I tried not to show, at least not too much, the disgust that I felt. The nurses were holding a *surprise* birthday party for me on the open deck. There was no surprise for this, as they did it for everyone on their birthday.

What was worse was the view. Due to the warm summer weather there were numerous scantily clad young ladies. What was so bad about the view was that it reminded me that at ninety, there was nothing that I could do about young ladies, scantily clad or otherwise. "*Life is wasted on the young.*"

"Make a wish and blow out your candles," Susan St. George said. "The others are waiting to welcome you into their club." The club was of those who had reached the age of ninety. About ten of the "inmates" were ninety or older.

I looked over at the over ninety club with despair. Three were drooling on themselves. Two weren't intelligent enough to drool on themselves. The remaining five were all wheel chair bound. Not much to look at, and even less to want to join.

"*I wish I was young again,*" I wished to myself, my gaze going passed the over ninety group to a group of teenage girls, hardly wearing anything at all on their fit and trim bodies. "*Like them.*" I finished my wish.

I tried to blow out the candles. Somehow all ninety candles went out under my feeble attempt to blow them out.

George Mitchell complained as I did so. "He has spit all over the cake."

Henry Wilson added his two cents worth with a, "good show old chap. Jolly good show."

George Mitchell continued to complain. "I don't want a piece he has spit on. Why did you let him spit on the cake?"

We were a sad lot. *“Life is wasted on the young.”*

It was mid morning when I woke. Normally, I woke with the sun. *“Must be getting old,”* I thought as I laid in my bed.

As I stretched, I could not help but think, *“I have not felt this good in years. Maybe today will be a good day.”*

I heard the knock on my door. “Mr. Jennings. It is Mary. Are you awake?”

I knew that if I answered she would come in and if I didn't she would come in. She knew I knew this as well and knew that I normally didn't answer.

I watched Mary enter my room, closing the door behind her. “What, still in bed? One would think you are old,” she said, with more than a trace of concern.

I moved a leg to let her know that there was still life in this body.

Once again I thought to myself, *“I sure do feel good. Almost like I was young again.”*

I continued to stretch and watch Mary as she moved to open the curtains in my room.

I moved to sit up, feeling a strange weight upon my chest as I moved. Before I could voice any concern, Mary opened the curtains and turned to look at me.

The look on her face changed from her normal motherly look, to surprise, to fear, to anger; about as fast as I could notice each emotion. “Who are you and what are you doing in Mr. Jennings' bed?” She asked as if she meant it.

“What the...” was all I said. My voice was not my voice. It was too high. “What the hell?” I managed to say on the second try, my voice still too high.

“I don't know who you are, young lady, but you have some explaining to do,” Mary said. “And watch your language.”

I knew she was mad at me. *“Young Lady?”*

With a sudden awareness, I stood and moved toward the only mirror in my room, the one in the bathroom. As I moved, my jockey shorts fell to around my knees. I stepped out of them and continued to the bathroom.

The reflection was a pretty young lady. I would guess she was in high school, but probably not a Senior. She was fairly tall for a woman. Her breasts were visible beneath the old T—shirt she wore. She was I.

I sat down on the toilet before I fell down. *“I am a girl. A GIRL! A GIRL!! A GIRL!!!*
SLAP.

My head was jerked sideways by the blow of the back of a hand.

SLAP.