

## *Wishing for Secrets*

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He had been distracted most of the day. Too many thoughts crowded into his head and each of these thoughts competed for his full attention. He had gathered the firewood for tonight's warmth and he had moved the cow to the south pasture. His older brothers were hunting with his dad. His mother was checking the nets in the pond. When she returned, she would have plenty of tasks that would keep him busy until sunset.

His oldest sister was at the creek working a piece of deer hide; she did the best work in the family, she knew how to make leather soft. It seemed to come to her naturally. This morning, after breakfast, she had told him she was going to give him the softest piece of the leather to fix his shoe. He knew she liked him best; she would probably sew the leather into the shoe for him. He adored her.

His youngest sister was almost a toddler. She was 18 months old and his mother called her Miry as short for 'miracle.' He had been eight years old when Miry was born.

There were secrets in the family. Secrets shared among the older kids. Secrets kept between his mom and dad. Painful stories that were never told, but were recalled by those knowing looks between dad and mom, or between mom and the older kids. Sometimes a conversation stopped

in mid-sentence when he entered a room or walked toward his parents. The family had many secrets, but he was in on the secret of the miracle.

Miry was in a hurry to get into the world; she arrived too early. He had heard his mother's pain in labor. His mother's greatest anguish was because Miry wasn't ready to be born. Miry was so tiny, so fragile and everyone worked day and night to keep her warm and to tell her that she was loved.

He had sat in a corner of the room with Miry bundled in cloth and wrapped in a small piece of deer hide. He had sat with her, rocking gently, singing to her, and telling her the stories he could remember from when he was a little boy.

For weeks, he spent every waking minute holding Miry or getting his mother water or milk or food. When his dad and brothers returned at night, they usually had something for his mother. They would save the blood from their kills and boil it to make a protein-rich broth. Sometimes they brought flowers or mushrooms, and they always found cedar or hickory branches to add their aromas to the fire.

When he was eight years old, he had become a real family member because his mom and dad talked with him about death, about loss, and about their fears. He had seen his father cry and he had seen the torment on his mother's face. No one hid anything from anyone else. Miry was all that mattered then and everyone feared losing her.

Next week he would be ten years old. He knew he was getting old enough to know more secrets. He wanted to know them all. He did not want to walk up on a conversation and have it stop, ever again. He was tired of being a kid; he wanted to be treated as a man.

"Did you move the cow?" His mother's question startled him out of his self-absorption.

"Yes."

"Come and help me clean these fish."

“All right.”

He joined his mother as she walked toward an area about halfway between the house and the creek. Miry followed just behind them. She had just started walking a few days ago. She still tottered a little and this was her first time walking outside the house. They paced themselves to stay just a few steps in front of the little girl. Close enough for her to keep trying to catch up with them.

“I’ll carry her,” he volunteered as he watched her struggling with the uneven path.

“Carry this,” his mother said as she handed him a gunnysack. He could feel the fish inside squirming and flipping against each other.

Miry tripped and fell to the ground with a thud. She looked up at her mother, who did not turn around. She began a tentative whimper that quickly became much louder crying.

“I’ll get her,” he said as he turned to walk toward the toddler.

“No,” his mother said. “If she cannot get up, we will help her. We are here to help her do what she cannot do for herself, and we are here to help her learn what she can do for herself. We must give her every chance to learn the difference.”

“How can you tell?” he asked, starting to feel worried that someday he, too, might have children and not know when to help them.

“Patience,” his mom said. “All parenting is patience. You must be patient with your children. You must trust that they will learn what they need to know when they need to know it; and children must be patient with their parents. They must understand that their parents struggle to keep them safe, to keep them healthy, and to see them happy.”

Miry stood up and began walking toward them. The boy

and his mom resumed their stroll toward the area where they would clean the fish.

“How do I get patience?” the boy asked, wondering if that might be one of the secrets being kept from him.

“By choosing to be kind,” his mother said. “Kindness is love and trust made visible.”

“That makes sense,” he said.

“You understand that, don’t you?” his mother asked. “You understand why Miry must get herself up and learn that being hurt or surprised can’t stop your progress.”

“Yes, I do,” he said as his mother vanished in a bright white light and he dropped his gunnysack.

He was sitting at a small kitchen table. A bowl of cereal sat before him and he held a spoon in his right hand.

The noises of a bustling city intruded into the little apartment. He looked out the window and watched as cars and people hurried below. He was on the third floor of somewhere. This was all familiar, yet he knew he had not been here before this moment.

Perhaps he had dreamed about this place. He had been here before. He knew where he was; he knew this city; he knew the street where he lived. Perhaps he was dreaming now.

“Stop day-dreaming and finish your breakfast, or you’ll be late for school.”

“Mom?” he asked as he turned to see the familiar woman. He knew her, too, but she looked different, younger. They were not in the country anymore; the city surrounded them.

“Where’s Miry?” he asked.

“Who?” his mother asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Where’s Miry? My sister.”

“Where did you come up with that idea?” his mother asked as she began clearing dishes from the table. “You know you can’t get a sister or a brother just by wishing for them or by pretending. Did you dream you have a sister?”

“It wasn’t a dream,” he insisted. “I have a sister and I have brothers and a big sister, and I have a dad. Where are they?”

“When you find them, let me know,” his mother said absentmindedly as she put the milk into the refrigerator and closed the door. “Stop stalling and get to school. Now, scoot!”

His mother gestured toward a denim backpack and he reached to pick it up. As he touched the cloth, the image of walking to school became clear in his mind and he knew there was someone he needed to talk to on the way.

“Bye!” he called out as he left the apartment and started down the stairwell he had never touched, but knew it had been part of his life for almost ten years. He was sure he was dreaming, but it seemed so real.

After navigating two flights of stairs, he paused at the door to the apartment complex. He stared at the frosted glass to regain his bearing. He needed to turn left to go to school, but somehow, he felt compelled to turn right. He needed to talk with someone, someone who could help him. He just did not know where to find that person.

He turned right and started down the street.

“Hey dummy!” a kid’s voice cried out. “Wrong way.”

“I need to do something,” he replied and walked down the street.

He began to wonder if he was going to miss school. He knew he needed to talk with someone, he kept getting glimpses of his next steps, his next turn, yet he could not see beyond a few paces ahead.

He heard an ambulance’s siren. He knew that was sig-

nificant. He should turn to his right and walk down that street; that's what he should do, but why?

As he walked, he began to count his steps. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and then he realized he had walked into an alley.

He did not like the smell. Moldy garbage smell and sewer odors were nasty. He wanted to turn around and get back to the street.

"Hey! Are you lost kid?"

The question almost drove him into a panic. He was lost, wasn't he? Should he tell someone he was lost? Yet, he didn't feel lost; he knew he was where he should be.

"You lost kid, and deaf?"

"No."

"You look lost."

"I just look like a boy."

"You look like a lost boy."

"I'm taking a short-cut."

"To where?"

"The place I need to be."

"Where is that?"

"It's... that way," he said as he continued walking. As he approached the end of the alley, the noises of the city once again crowded into his consciousness.

"Do you believe?" The voice was loud and intimidating. A tall man stood on a crate and was shouting his question to everyone passing by, "Do you believe?"

Someone muttered, "Get a job!" Another person dropped some coins at the feet of the man on the crate.

"Do you believe?" the man said as he turned and faced the boy. "Do you?"

“Believe what?” he asked the man.

The man’s clothing was worn, but clean. He had not shaved for a few days. He stepped down from the crate and gathered up the dropped coins. He pocketed the money and sat down on the crate. He studied the boy for a moment and asked, “Young man: What do you believe?”

“I don’t know,” the boy answered.

“Do you believe in God?”

“I don’t know,” the boy answered as he began looking around for a good way to escape this conversation. “Yeah, I guess I do, even if he doesn’t do anything for me. I’ve got to go.”

“Go where?” the man asked. “I thought you were looking for me; the siren, the alley, and all that.”

“What?” the boy asked beginning to feel afraid.

“All right,” the man said, “one wish for your birthday. I will grant you one wish.”

“I want to understand God,” the boy said, knowing that would stop this man in his tracks and he could continue to search for the person he was supposed to find.

“Take off your backpack, sit on this crate, and hold the backpack in your lap,” the man instructed.

This wasn’t working, the boy just wanted to get away.

“Go ahead,” the man said as he stood.

The boy complied. As he sat down, everything around him vanished. As his eyes re-adjusted to a gloomy evening, he realized a thunderstorm was building. He was sitting on a bench on the side of a road on the outskirts of a small town. Three men sat huddled together next to him. A small leaky roof kept most of the rain from pelting down on them. A man, riding a horse, passed by and nodded and all three men nodded back.

Rain drenched the man and his horse. Water streamed down the man's coat and onto the horse's back. The horse continued down the street and the slow clip-clopping sound faded.

Lightening erupted from the sky, striking the man and the horse. The man fell to the ground and the horse collapsed, lifeless in the muddy street.

The rain continued to batter the ground and small streams of water ran through the mud.

"One must please God or suffer his wrath," the first man said.

The other two men nodded in agreement and then watched as the man who had been struck down, stood up, and walked to his horse.

"Ah!" the second man said, solemnly. "The horse displeased the Almighty."

The other two men nodded and then watched as the horse stirred and rose to his feet. The rider mounted the horse and continued down the street.

"Perhaps," the third man said, "it was just lightening. What do you think, young man?"

The boy sat clutching his backpack. "I need to get to school," he said as he stood.

"Where are you now?" the second man asked.

"I don't know," the boy said.

"Then you could be in school, right?" the second man asked.

"No, I'm not," the boy insisted.

"Do you always argue with your teachers?" the second man asked.

"No," the boy said, quietly, apologetically.

"You want to understand God?" the third man asked.

“How would your life be different if you understood God?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

“There are many views of God,” the first man began. “Your point of view will determine God’s purpose in your life, and...”

“I don’t think he wants to understand God,” the third man interrupted. “He made that wish to stump the preacher and get on with his day. He was looking for someone. He wants answers.”

“Very well,” the second man said. “What do you want to know? What would make your tenth birthday special?”

“I want to know the secrets,” the boy said, sounding a little sad. “I want to know why there are so many things that everyone else knows and I do not know.”

“The world is full of secrets,” the first man began. “Some secrets have been lost to time. Some secrets contain only fear. Some secrets bring great joy, but they are not told, only experienced.”

“Most secrets are not meant to be secrets,” the second man said; “they are just overlooked. People forget to pass them on.”

“For my tenth birthday,” the boy announced. “I would like each of you to tell me one secret.”

“That would be a grand present!” the third man announced. “Shall we tell you what you are ready to know or would you rather hear secrets that might bother you?”

“Tell me anything.”

“I will tell you life’s greatest secret,” the first man said. “You have always been and you will always be. You were present at the beginning of the universe. You saw the stars flare into being and you marveled at the creation of galaxies without limit. You knew only love and unity, because we had not yet invented separation, pain, and fear. Everyone

you have ever known, everyone you know, and everyone you will ever know was with you then and will be with you throughout eternity. That is a very important secret and few people remember it.”

“I’m going to be ten,” the boy said. “I don’t remember being there.”

“So it’s a secret you have hidden from yourself,” the second man said. “It’s best to learn those secrets first; then no other secrets will matter to you.”

“Ok, I’m old,” the boy said.

“Not old,” the third man said. “Age is a feature of things that are temporary. Age is meaningless to the eternal.”

“Ready for the next secret?” the third man asked.

“Yes, I guess.”

“Popcorn tastes best with butter on it.”

The two other men looked quickly at the third man.

“I guess that’s not really a secret is it?” he asked, then continued. “Life is a series of lessons to help you learn that you have nothing to learn. From the beginning of time, you have known all you need to know. Every truth of the universe is in you and all knowledge is yours when you decide to claim it.”

“So I don’t need to go to school anymore?”

“Only when you need to hide from this truth,” the second man said. “You are eternal; you are all knowing; and it is your great power that keeps these secrets from you. You deny who you are and claim to be what you are not. It’s just a small gap in knowing who you are; a story you tell yourself, then forget it is a story and believe you are the story.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” the boy said. “I can’t be eternal, I can’t be super smart, and I can’t be hiding from myself.”

“Then you are the most amazing thing in the universe!” the first man said loudly, and he and the other two men began clapping.

“Stop it,” the boy said. “This is silly.”

“Look at that tree across the road,” the second man said. “It has always been in this universe. Every atom in it has existed for billions of years. The energy that pulses through its leaves has been in the universe since the beginning. Everything that is that tree is as ancient as the stars themselves.”

“Young man,” the third man said. “You must understand that if you are right and you are not eternal, then you are *new* in the universe. Did you come from someplace outside the universe?”

“I don’t know,” the boy said.

“How did you get here?” the second man asked. “Tell us everything you remember.”

“I don’t remember anything.”

“If you don’t remember anything, how can you be sure you are right about your existence?” the first man asked. “Think hard: what proof do you have that you are not eternal?”

“I’ll die,” the boy said. “That’s proof!”

“Proof of what?” the third man asked. “What does dying prove about you?”

“That I’m not eternal,” the boy said.

“Is that your best answer?” the second man asked. “Because you die you think you stop existing?”

“I know,” the boy said. “You’ll tell me I have a soul or something, right?”

“No!” the first man said, emphatically. “You do not have a soul.”

“Actually,” the third man said. “You have two soles; one on each shoe. But, the one on the right is a little worn and your sister is waiting to mend it with the deer leather she was working on this morning.”

“You do not *have* a soul,” the second man said, softly. “There isn’t a ‘you’ that could possess something as powerful, as wonderful, and as eternal, as a soul. You *are* the soul, you are spirit.”

The third man held up his hand. He clenched and unclenched his fingers slowly in front of his face. “Young man?” he asked. “What is this in front of my face?”

“Your hand,” the boy said.

“No,” the second man said. “It is a glove.”

“All right,” the boy replied. “It’s a glove.”

“Is the glove alive?” the first man asked.

“No.”

“But it moves and it is warm,” the first man said.

“How can you say the glove is not alive?” the second man asked. “Everything about it is alive.”

“Yes,” the third man said. “Watch, it is about to wave to you. I think it likes you.”

“When you take it off it will stop moving,” the boy said, sounding annoyed.

“But if we say ‘the body has a soul,’ aren’t we saying ‘the glove has a hand?’” the second man asked. “I think that might confuse us into believing gloves control hands and that hands are helpless without gloves.”

“Yes,” the third man said. “I could see that leading to confusion: Gloves might believe they are greater than hands and that without gloves, hands cannot do anything.”

“Yes,” the second man added. “Some gloves might even think that without gloves, hands do not exist!”

“I don’t care,” the boy said, growing increasingly impatient with the conversation. “This is silly: who’s cares about gloves?”

“You do!” the first man said, emphatically. “You see the glove and you touch it and it is real to you. You believe it is life. You do not see the hand because you have hidden it deep in your memory.”

“You have kept this secret from yourself,” the second man added. “It is your biggest secret. You credit the glove for what the hand does and you believe that when the hand leaves the glove, it ceases to exist.”

“I am a spirit. I have a body,” the boy said slowly. “I think I get that; it makes sense, now. What about...”

“Recess!” the third man said.

“But I—” The boy’s protest vanished as quickly as a vapor in the cool night air.

He was warm, snuggly warm in a bed. A blanket covered his face. He listened carefully and heard sounds a long way off. Something was moving toward him. Slowly, carefully, he pulled the cover down from his face. A light in the hallway dimly lit the room. The door was slightly open and he watched as someone pushed it wide open and rolled a tall cart into the room.

“Breakfast,” she announced. “Wake up, sit up, it’s a new day.”

He pushed the covers down to his waist and tried to sit up. Both legs wretched with pain and he cried out.

“Still hurting?” she asked. “I’ll get you something.”

“Why do my legs hurt?” the boy asked.

“It’s hard to understand, isn’t it?” she replied. “It’s called ‘phantom pain.’ Your legs are gone, but you can still feel them—strange, isn’t it?”

“Where’s my mother?” the boy asked, sounding desperate.

“It’s hard to accept, isn’t it?” the woman asked. “You were the only survivor—your family is gone.”

“What happened to them?”

“They died in the accident.”

“Why did they die?”

“Do you want to know ‘how’ or ‘why’?” the woman asked. “If you want to know ‘how,’ that’s a regular question; if you want to know ‘why,’ you will need to use a birthday wish.”

“Could I wish to get my legs back?” the boy said as he felt beneath the covers and found that both legs were gone just below his knees.

“Yes,” she said. “I believe you can wish for anything you want for your birthday.”

“Then I want to know ‘why’ people die; why did my family die?”

“You only have one wish left,” the woman said. “Is this how you want to use it? Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“You would rather know why people die than to get your legs back?”

“Yes.”

“No running, no chasing, you will never pick up Miry and carry her to the house. You will never walk to school.”

“I want to know ‘why’ people die.”

“Very well; have a good time.”

His bottom felt cold. The backs of his legs pressed against the chilly granite and he heard someone whistling. He looked to his left and saw a man, digging a hole in the earth. It was a grave; he was in a cemetery—a huge ceme-

tery that stretched endlessly in every direction. The man continued to dig and to whistle.

“Excuse me,” the boy said.

The man did not respond.

“Sir! Excuse me,” the boy said louder.

“What?” the man said as he looked up. “Oh. I see you’re here. Have you been here long?”

“Not long,” the boy said. “How about you, have you been here long?”

“Since the beginning,” the man said. “I don’t usually get them talking. Usually they’re silent. Are you sure you’re supposed to be here?”

“I don’t know,” the boy said. “I just want someone to tell me why people die.”

“Oh!” the man said and chuckled to himself as he leaned on his shovel. “I guess you’re an ‘inquiry’ not a delivery. Big difference you know. Most of the time I get deliveries; very few inquiries.”

“I need to talk with the person who knows why we die,” the boy said.

“A doctor could tell you that,” the man said as he scooped out another shovel-full of dirt onto the tarp beside the grave.

“I don’t want to know ‘what’ kills people,” the boy said. “I want to know ‘why’ people die.”

“That’s an important distinction,” the man said. “That is sophisticated. You’re almost ten years old, right?”

“Yes.”

“... and you want to know ‘why’ people die.”

“Yes.”

“All right,” the man said. “Tell me what you believe.”

“About what?”

“Are you a glove or are you a hand?”

“How do you know about that?”

“I know everything.”

“I’m a hand in a glove.”

“Good,” the man said. “You are ready for this.”

“For what?”

“The story of the rabbit,” the man said. “Once, a little rabbit was born deep inside a den beneath the earth.”

“I’m almost ten years old,” the boy said. “I don’t need stories about bunnies.”

“All right,” the man said, “once a ferocious man-eating tiger was born deep in the jungle.”

The boy stared at the man, only partly amused.

“At night,” the man said, “the tiger slept in his bed. Each morning he awoke at sunrise, ate breakfast, played in his yard, took a nap in the afternoon, played some more, ate supper, and went back to his bed in the evening.”

“The next morning,” the man continued, “the tiger awoke at sunrise, ate breakfast, played in his yard, took a nap in the afternoon, played some more, ate supper, and went back to his bed in the evening.”

“Does this story have a point?” the boy asked.

“Yes,” the man said, “however, to make the point, I must repeat it twenty-seven thousand times. So, the tiger awoke at sunrise, ate breakfast, played in his—”

“Stop,” the boy said. “I can’t listen to that anymore.”

“It’s boring, isn’t it?” the man said. “Immortality in just one glove, in just one place would be unbearable, don’t you think?”

“Yes.”

“Changing gloves means casting off the old one and picking a new one, in a new place and a new time. If you really believe in hands, then gloves don’t matter, do they?”

“I don’t think I understand this, yet,” the boy said. “Are you saying I choose to die? That it is something I want?”

“Yep,” the man said. “That’s about it. The alternative would be that the universe kills you; but, if you are eternal and you know everything, then nothing outlives you, out-smarts you, or ‘takes’ your life. It just couldn’t work any other way, could it?”

“I choose my destiny?” the boy said. “It’s up to me?”

“That’s how everyone who knows sees it. Those who hide from the secrets like to think they are an accident, they are a glove that gets knocked around by all the other gloves.”

“I think I understand,” the boy said. “What do you want me to know before I leave?”

“See the eternal in everyone; be patient with those who are still hiding from the truth, their time will come, too. Those who are mean have forgotten they are eternal. Those who are greedy have forgotten they are the universe. Kindness is love and trust made visible. Tell Miry ‘hi’ from me.”

“Did you move the cow?” His mother’s question startled him out of his self-absorption. He was surprised to be standing in the field near his home.

“Yeah, I did,” the boy said. “I just got back.”

“Of course you did,” his mother said. “Come and help me clean these fish.”

“Yes,” the boy said. “I’d like to help you.”

They walked up the slight grade toward the place where they would clean the fish. Miry followed them. The little girl tripped and fell to the ground with a firm thud. She began to cry. The boy looked at his mom, seeing her as he had never seen her before this moment.

“I guess we need to be patient with Miry,” he said. “Let her find out what she can do for herself and help her when she can’t. That seems like the kindest thing to do right now.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “Here, put on these gloves and help me with the fish.”