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# Genies

by Nicholas Meriwether

"It's the same old story. Nothin' new. In fact, it's not even a story—it's just nothing."

The man seated next to the speaker of this bar-room soliloquy nodded, attentive, concentrating: mid-forties, scruffy salt-and-pepper beard, kindly crinkle to the corners of the eyes. He knew his role; he was just wondering how to play the next few lines. He nodded slowly, half-smile telegraphing sympathy to the man standing next to him.

"Lotta somethings can hide in nothing."

That sparked a flicker of a smile. "I reckon."

The seated man sipped his beer again, let a few more minutes get filled by the mindless eighties pop drowning the silence that resurfaced in the brief, odd moments when the music paused. That silence was as strange as whale song, an eerie white noise made up of human longing and desperation and drunkenness normally cloaked by the alcohol-infused mists carrying off-color jokes and frenzied cajolery. Once, many years ago, the seated man had shared a joint with a friend in the parking lot, and when they walked back inside from the warm summer night into the neon gloom, it had all somehow seemed alive, all the smoke and shouts and laughter and music swirling and phosphorescing like the primordial sea right after it got that magic bolt of lightning that made it all come alive for the first time.

His pot-smoking days were long passed, but he remembered that image a little wistfully; he thought about it some nights when he walked the few blocks to the bar from his little house, wondering if he would ever open the door and see it in quite the same light, when the tin-clad cinder-blocks and cheap ceiling fans turned into some vast cosmic machine that soothed and mollified and transformed a crowd of sad-eyed drunken refugees into something as close to communal ecstasy as anything they would ever feel. A night when he would see a real-world Orgone Accumulator, and

a cheap little dive in small-town South Carolina would vindicate Wilhelm Reich and his crackpot theory at last.

"I'm not even sure that story stays the same. I think it gets changed by the telling. I think it's alive, and changes and adapts as it passes through us, and it feeds on us, too; that's why it hurts. Just a virus we haven't recognized."

His companion looked down and nodded, "Yeah, it's definitely a sickness," and snorted. "When my folks split up, the minister came and visited me and my little sister and told us that it was okay to feel rotten about it because divorce was a kind of death. I didn't understand then, but I do now. When you spend time with someone, even when it's bad, and you try to do the right thing and it doesn't work out—then yeah, that's death. Sure it is."

"I can see that."

Early in the evening to see condensation already running down the windows. There weren't many windows, and they were small and high up on the wall behind the bar. Once they had held air conditioners, before the bar had put in a central system. The seated man watched a dribble roll down the glass, carving a path through its fellows, veering left and right in little straight lines put together crookedly, mapping out stiff little football maneuvers. Who was the coach? What was the play that mapped out how this drop moved and responded to those unseen forces steering those lines?

"Maybe that's your story, then. You still had two parents, even when they were apart. Split something and you turn one thing into two. There are still two stories there. Three, really, since the relationship has its own story to tell.

"That's the thing about a bad relationship: it's a cage that prevents stories from being told, and there are three stories trapped inside. Some of the genies in bottles weren't very nice, but that was



always because they had been trapped.”

He nodded. “Yeah. It was a cage, all right. Maybe that’s why it took both our lies to break it. She’s been seeing somebody I know for a while now. And I don’t know why I care—that’s the thing. It got so bad I couldn’t even screw her. Couldn’t even get it up. And she kept on saying how much she loved me, how she could never date anyone else, how she would kill herself if I left her. So when my dad got sick, I let her think I had moved in to take care of him; which I did, for a while, but not that long.

“So I lied. And so did she. I shouldn’ta been surprised, but I was. It’s classic: she doesn’t know how to tell me that she wants to break up, I don’t know how to tell her, so we just linger on in this twilight, when the sun has definitely gone down but no one can admit that it’s cold and dark and time to go on back inside.”

The other man nodded. *And everyone inside is looking at the couple outside, frozen in shock and alienation, wondering how long they can go on before they realize that each is the only keeper of the other’s secret. Everyone else knows. Anyone can see.*

Except for those immersed in it. Truck tires on gravel outside interjected, punctuated by the popping sound of a bottle collapsing. Someone leaving angry.

“The funny thing is, I didn’t even like her, never really did.” His smile wasn’t forced this time. “She was shallow and selfish, and I knew that but couldn’t admit it. I thought I needed the reassurance.” The smile looked genuinely rueful now. “Who was selfish?” He took another sip, then swigged the rest of the bottle. “When the hunter gets captured by the game.”

“Or maybe he just falls into one of his old traps,” his companion replied. “Mighta forgot it, but it hadn’t forgot him.”

As he walked out into the warm night, crunching through the gravel of the parking lot, he ruminated on the conversation. Sometimes talk was the only balm that worked. The owner ought to pay him to hold office hours, he chuckled.

A bottle—the same one he had heard breaking, maybe—had left some good-sized pieces, enough to stab a tire, so he picked up the worst offenders and tossed them in the weeds in the lot next door. You could still see the outline of the bottle in its fragments, even after the big pieces were missing. It looked almost pretty in silhouette, the buzz of summer playing in the background, streetlights painting the glass yellow. Genies once lived here.

Maybe that’s why we need to tell the old stories. We always forget what we do, even if the rest of the world remembers.

