

From the Pages of the *Iliad*

While reading Homer's *Iliad*, in the original Greek, of course, he turned a page. A curious figure popped up in the chair across from my desk.

"Hello. I'm here, not by happenstance, but when you happened on the heart of Homer's *Iliad*, I was hailed to hand you your heart's desire, and to offer you my heart-felt help."

Astounded to be addressing an image that appeared out of nowhere and could utter a sentence with eight words starting with "h," he said, "As a child, I read stories about genies popping out of bottles, granting wishes, and becoming slaves of the ones who rubbed the bottle—always by accident, of course. But when you appear and tell me you can grant me a wish simply because I've opened a dusty book, you can understand my skepticism. You could be a dream or a hallucination. I haven't the slightest idea where you came from or how you got into my study."

The figure appeared solid. It spoke. "Indeed, I understand your justifiably judicious judgment that someone is joking with you. TV shows and lotteries entice people in a fog of flimflam going as far back as the ill-fated King Midas. He was thrilled everything he touched turned to gold until he kissed his only daughter on the cheek and—no more daughter, no more heir, no more loving family. If you need a longer bibliography, think about Jack with his magic beans."

He smiled. "Do you have a name?"

"Creatures like me do not have fixed names. We can choose any name we like and change it at will. Today I like the name Tarot," he said. "I know you're Keir McGregor. I could write a short bio on you. You worked as a lifeguard. A few years into your adulthood you chose the path of a scholar, and you now teach classics at the university."

Keir said, "So, in your world, privacy counts for nothing." He continued, "Am I supposed to ask you to do some impossible feat to show your powers?"

"You could, but that would be a wanton waste of your one wish."

"Only one, not three?"

"Three is traditional, but times are tough—the economy being what it is," spoke Tarot. "There are limits to what you can wish for. I can't time travel—go back

and prevent the assassination of Lincoln or change the outcome of the Vietnamese War. I can only act in the present. I can't kill someone you hate or bring someone back from the dead, like your grandfather." His hands did a flourish and a small puff of smoke drifted upward. His eyes twinkled, but in fact, nothing happened.

"OK. I'll go along with it. What *can* you grant?"

"I can do healings, what were once called exorcisms—bring a bitter body a better spirit. If you know someone who's a pest, I can fix that. I can also grant or take away material goods. If you want to make someone rich, including yourself—or poor—I can do that."

Keir smiled and thought, *I might as well have fun with this as long as it lasts*. "You know, you don't *look* like a genie. You're not dressed in a turban and pantaloons or sporting a handlebar mustache. You didn't float up out of a bottle."

"I dress for the times. For good or ill, I'm here now because you decided to read the *Iliad*, and you came to page 132. I'm bookmarked there. I can assume you're interested in Greek poetry."

"You're right. I teach at the university. I'm a fan of all things Greek," Keir said. "Regarding the wish, how long do I have to make up my mind?"

"Any reasonable amount of time. Most people select from the great trilogy: wealth, fame, and power, the most popular being wealth. But it turns out that many can't manage money smartly, and after a month or more, they're mooching money on Main Street. Coming into wealth revealed they had little common sense to begin with."

"I've heard of cases like that. Trust me, common sense is not one of my strong suits," said Keir.

"The pecuniary power of the purse doesn't change a person. Possessions are not always partnered with prudence. If you're thinking about wealth, consider who you really are."

"I know who I'm not. I'm not a shaker or a mover. I've never stayed in a five-star hotel or flown on a private jet. Or had servants to cater to my whims."

"At least you're aware of a wider world than the one you now occupy. So, did this awareness change your views towards wealth and material things?"

"Wealth wouldn't make my top ten," said Keir.

“You have a doctorate. Perhaps you would like to enroll in MENSA and exhibit your elevated erudition among the elite.”

“I don’t think a high IQ would impress the few friends I have,” Keir said. “Degrees mean something, but a piece of paper doesn’t make anyone wiser or more useful.”

The genie scratched his head. “I like your distinction between education and wisdom. Solomon asked for wisdom. He got that, plus wealth and power, and more trouble than he could handle. It didn’t pay off for him.” Tarot paused and squinted. “This might take a while, so I’m off to Wonderland to await my next project.” And he vanished.

The dust on my badly worn book lay undisturbed. I expected to smell burning sulfur or hear the eerie laughter of a mad man, but there was nothing. I was alone.

Was I going bonkers? I had to get out, so I took my usual 15-minute walk to The Land of Oz where Joe and I share a beer weeknights. He was waiting for me, elbows on the bar. We settled in a booth. “Joe, if a magic fairy came along and granted you a wish, what would you wish for?”

“I would need three wishes,” he replied without hesitation. “First, I would choose the ability to heal people. I would hold a person’s hand for 30 seconds. Nothing would happen, and people would laugh at me and make fun of me. But the next day, after I was long gone, the person would suddenly realize he’s healed. Then they’d come looking for me to help other people, but I’d be gone.”

I said, “That’s not bad. You could help a lot of sick people. But isn’t the healing hands thing a bit weird?”

“I never mentioned it to you but, before we met, I used to go to a little charismatic church in Ashton with my friend Dave. God used me to heal people. I was young and healthy. I was laying hands on people and the healing was happening. It was cool.”

“So, what happened? Did it stop or fade away?”

“It did, and I don’t know exactly when or why. My beliefs got all garbled.”

“Besides being able to heal, what’s your second wish?”

“I’d like to win the lottery. I’d help people with the money but keep enough to live on and travel. I’d meet some people, pay some bills, buy them a few things, and move on. I wouldn’t put cash in their hands, because there’s no telling how they might spend it, and I’m not into supporting anyone’s habit.”

I marveled. "What would your third wish be?"

"Health. I would like to have good health until the day I die, and then to die naturally. I don't want to live forever, but I'd like to be healthy till the end. How about you, Bro? What would you do with your three wishes?"

"I'm thinking it over. I like your idea of helping and healing others, but it sounds a bit bizarre."

Joe said, "If you started healing and got well known for it, you could start a church, get on TV, and put on a show. You've already got the Southern drawl." Joe always said I had *the south in my mouth*.

Walking home I thought about Joe's three wishes. If I wished for wealth, I'd wish for more than I could count. But people who are wealthy live in a self-imposed prison to protect themselves from good-time friends, scam artists, and the crazies. They probably have more bodyguards than the President. I don't envy Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. Perhaps I was asleep the day they passed out greed genes.

The following day, I again opened the *Iliad* to page 132, and in an instant, there he was. "Hello, again. Have you come to a decision yet?"

"You really are real. Okay, whatever. I am reluctant to choose wealth. I have no confidence that I could handle it, and not much of a *yen* to try."

"And you a humanities professor," he laughed slightly at my pun, although I expected a groan. "You've made a wise decision, or a non-decision, as the case may be. I'm glad you don't gravitate toward greed." He paused. "How about fame, notoriety? Do you want to be an actor, painter, author, musician?"

"I've thought of acting, I've tried painting and music, but I think my strongest passion is to be a writer. There is something about the ability to mold thought that has interested me for years. I haven't mastered the skill, but I can tell when it's missing in something I'm reading."

The genie lowered himself into an overstuffed chair facing the desk and asked, "What would you write about? Do you have anything in mind?"

"It would have to have a universal theme: love, life, death, the human condition, perhaps a sweeping saga with a universal theme. How are you at editing?"

"I've edited a few titles you would recognize, but none lately. What draws you to this option?"

“The idea that when I die, I would like to live on—not like a spirit in ‘heaven,’ or a ghost. I’d like to know that my words are on people’s lips long after I’m gone—like Shakespeare, or Dickens.”

“You might not need my help to achieve that goal.”

“Imagining ways to use my wish makes me think of possibilities I never dreamed of. I’ve wondered if ‘none of the above’ might be the best answer. I have a lady I feel strongly toward; I have a few close friends; my job is as secure as tenure can make it. I have more wealth than 98 percent of the world’s population. I live in America. What’s wrong with *that* picture?”

“You’d be passing up an opportunity to get out of your safe zone, a chance to see what the unknown might bring to your life. There are challenges you could meet head on instead of waiting for life to come to you.”

Keir smiled. “Isn’t life on the edge reserved for the young? They’re immortal. They can’t die. They live for the moment, and I’m past that point in my life.”

“You might be, but from my perspective, that would be a tragedy. To live a life with no more surprises, no more ah-ha moments, no more blazing points of light. It sounds like settling.”

“I’ll give it some thought . . .” And the genie was gone again.

Clara and I went to the beach where we met when we were both lifeguards. Besides her great body, she is beautiful and smart.

“You take the food,” I said. “I’ll bring the towels and umbrella. The surf’s not high, and we have the beach to ourselves.”

I perched on a large towel with Clara stooping behind me. As she applied sunblock to my back, she asked, “What’s the mystery you were going to tell me about?”

I told her all about Tarot. She said, “That sounds crazy—a little man jumping out of a book. Sheesh.”

“If you saw Tarot, you wouldn’t laugh. That you would not do.”

“Then I must see the little man who pops out of a book. Even then, I might not believe,” Clara said.

“I love that about you. Practical. Skeptical. Come home with me. I’ll see if I can scare up my little friend. Then we’ll send him away so we can have some privacy.”

“If you think you’re going to have any ‘privacy’ with me when there is a ghost that might pop up at any moment, you’ve got another *think* coming,” she said.

“I’ll race you,” I said. She jumped up and ran ahead of me. The sea was only a bit chilly. My strokes were longer than Clara’s, but I stayed beside her until we had swum out for a half hour.

“Time to turn back,” I yelled. Another 30 minutes and we walked onto the beach. A gentle wind warmed us, and we dried off quickly. Comfortable on the towel under an umbrella, I looked at Clara, lying her back, eyes closed, hands across her belly. *I am one lucky guy*, I thought. I wanted her, but I was content to love her with my eyes.

Clara was silent on the short drive into town. Finally, she said, “If you summon your little friend, and he doesn’t appear, I’ll have to have you certified.” I know she meant it as a joke, but I admit it made me nervous. *What if nothing happened? What if Tarot refused to show himself? Could Clara be right? Am I going bonkers?*

I should not have worried. As soon as Clara got seated, I opened *The Illiad*, and Tarot appeared for the third time. “Good day, good professor and . . . goodness! You must be the gorgeous girl he graciously described.”

Clara’s gaze turned from him to me, back to him, and back to me.

“Please, Clara. Don’t be afraid or puzzled. I’m sure Keir has told you all about me. Being a trained scholar, he probably got it right.”

“I don’t know what to say,” said Clara.

Tarot said, “You need no words. Wait, watch, and wonder.” Then he turned his attention to me. “Keir, have you decided how to use your wish?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Tarot, but no, I haven’t decided, but since Clara has seen you, she can help me explore the possibilities.”

“Fine. Can I assume that you’ll accept and appreciate my absence for a season? Your hesitation allows me time to take on another case, not nearly so complicated as yours. A day or two should do it.” And he was gone.

“You heard him, Clara. He won’t be back for a day or two.” I extended my hand. She took it and followed me down the hall. And we had some privacy.

The next morning, I hit the shower and shaved. The aroma told me Clara had fixed one of her fantastic breakfasts. On these occasions, we cast all dietary cautions aside. Still in our robes, we feasted on omelets, hash browns, orange juice, French

toast with maple syrup, bacon, sausage, and hot coffee. The food is plain, like I like it, except for the omelets. Clara empties my refrigerator crisper drawer. If it's not nailed down, she works it into the mix. They are never the same twice, and they are always five-star.

In the middle of French toast, I said, "Thanks for breakfast. You've outdone yourself. But to turn to the topic, what are your thoughts about Tarot and the wish?"

"I can hardly believe I'm taking this 'wish' thing seriously," she said. "Genies are not real. This is a scientific world. Some people have paranormal experiences, but not me. This has me stumped. I wouldn't give it a second thought; except I saw him with my own eyes. Maybe we're both crazy."

She raised a bite of omelet to her lips, and I wanted to kiss them. I looked her straight in the eye. She knew what I was thinking.

"Eat your breakfast," she said. "Keep your mind on the subject."

"What if my wish is to be the world's greatest lover?"

"Why wish for what you already are?" she replied. "But don't bother. I've got to go to work."

That evening at the bar, I said, "Joe, I want to bounce something off you. I'm going to tell you a story. You tell me how to end it." I told Joe everything.

As the story unfolded, his eyes got bigger and bigger. He said, "Keir, you believe one of your fantasies may actually happen? And you're not sure you want it?" I could almost see his brain running like a kid on the loose in a candy store. Finally, he spoke. "Give it to me. I'd run with it."

"Transferability never came up. I'm asking you to help me with my decision."

"If you don't want it man, I do."

"Joe, can you focus for a few minutes?"

"Okay, I give. Not transferable. What about wishing for something like world peace?"

"Frankly, I think it might last about one day, then we'd be back to what we call normal. The same thing for wishing everyone to be healed. The next day, some kid at soccer practice falls and breaks his leg. I can think of nothing to wish for that wouldn't fall victim to our humanity. Human life can't be perfect, and perfect life is no longer human."

Joe's eyes were gleaming. The wheels were turning. The imp in him was ready to spring. "Then how about working the other side of the equation? Not the human side, but the other side?"

"You mean—what? A wish that affects Tarot?" I had to take a deep breath. "Man— that's mind-blowing!"

Joe said, "Think you could bring Tarot into the real world?"

"Tarot as a human? Without his powers? Is it possible?"

At my desk near sundown, watching the bookshelves on the opposite wall gradually grow dimmer, strategizing about how to approach Tarot, I sat in solitude until the room was dark, trying to anticipate Tarot's reactions. I dialed the lamp on my desk to its lowest setting, took *The Iliad* from the shelf, and placed it before me unopened. My brain was spinning with possible scenarios when I opened it to page 132.

"Keir, my boy. You've had copious time to cogitate, so what conclusion have you come to? I've told my colleagues about your conundrum, and they found it captivating, a first for us. Our clients rarely resist a call to wealth or power."

"Tarot," I told him, "what if—just what if—I wished for you to become human?"

"Whaat?" he gasped. "Are you messing with me?"

"Do I have the power to wish you into human form?"

"I feel an unfamiliar feeling. I must fly." He said, frowning at the closed book. He pleaded, "Please, Keir, open the book."

"First, tell me if it's possible."

"I don't know for sure. I heard lore about a lad in the library of a noble Latvian family. One of his father's tomes accidentally toppled and fell open, ejecting one of my colleagues. The maid picked up the book, closed it, and returned it to a top shelf. My colleague had no escape. In a state of despair, the boy through tears wished my colleague were his pet and would stay with him forever. According to the story my colleague instantly became a wolfhound that never left the boy's side. By the time the boy became a man, the wolfhound had reached old age. The pet died, and no one has heard from him since. However," he added, "I'm not sure that answers the question."

"If it helps, I think of you as an equal, not as a pet."

“You know you’re talking incarnation, don’t you? There are stories about spirits taking human form, the most famous in the Western world being Jesus.”

“Do you believe those stories, Tarot?”

“All cultures have incarnation stories. There’s no way to verify them. My colleagues and I live in the present. For us to probe the catacombs of the past is pointless.”

“Imagine, Tarot. you could know the joys and pains, the highs and lows of what it means to be human. As a perk, if you still had superpowers, you’d be a hero. Stores would sell your action figures.”

“And you think that’s better than what I do now?”

“Perhaps. You wanted me to get out of my comfort zone. How about getting out of yours?”

“Please, Keir, open the book. I must discuss this with my colleagues.”

“Do I have your word you’ll return?” I asked.

“I must. I can’t leave an assignment unfinished.”

At the opening of my book came a whooshing sound, and he was gone. I had no idea how long it might be till Tarot returned.

No matter. I decided Joe and Clara and I needed a conference—to anticipate the consequences of Tarot’s becoming human.

“Do you want a beer, Clara?” I asked as we slid into a booth opposite Joe.

“No way, not if I intend to get any thinking done. Perhaps you guys should go light, too.”

“Beer, if anything, loosens up the hinges and gets Joe’s brain operating faster and more efficiently,” I said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” said Joe, “no matter how you meant it.”

Clara said, “If we assume it’s possible for Tarot to cross over, shouldn’t we ask how he feels about it? Shouldn’t he be part of our conversation? We’re considering changing his whole universe, not just his body.”

Joe said, “We’re meddling in his life like he’s meddled in others’ for his entire existence.”

I was concerned. I had grown to like Tarot, including his affinity for alliteration. If he crossed over, would he be lost to me forever? If I met him somewhere, how would I know it was Tarot?

Clara agreed with Joe, who said, “When and if you meet him as a human being, your best hope of recognizing him is if the first sentence out of some stranger’s mouth contains a string of alliterations.”

I decided. “I’m going to do it—wish for Tarot to become human.”

Joe said, “You’ve got to let us watch.”

“No, I think not. We have no way of knowing what will happen. If anyone gets hurt, it should be me, not you.”

I waited in my study. The *Iliad*, opened to page 132, was clearly visible. Just like before, without warning, he appeared.

“Tarot, welcome back, buddy! How was your meeting with your colleagues? Did you get any answers?”

“I did not. They were as puzzled as you, Clara, and Joe were at your meeting. Yes, I was eavesdropping. At first, when I told my colleagues about your decision to forego your wish and your reasons for doing so, they laughed, and hooted you were probably the most foolish person who ever lived. They said, ‘You’re kidding. Surely, he’ll not reject this chance to have a dream come true. In all the history of time, no one has ever refused us, even those who eventually bemoaned their choice. At least they tried.’”

I laughed. “So, your colleagues agree, some of their clients should have said no, like I’m saying? Now that’s funny.”

“Funny to you, perhaps, but not to me. We don’t have what humans call resumes, but we have records. If you refuse my offer, this will reflect badly on me. Our Leader was infuriated. You should have heard him, ‘Who does he think he is? This man who’s saying no to the chance to do something fantastic?’ The discussion was heated. Eventually, the group voted to give you an award for being the wisest person we ever encountered. You’d be our hero.”

“Sorry to disappoint you and mess up your record, Tarot, but I’ve made up my mind.”

The pained expression on his face showed several emotions, primary, apprehension. “Then at least give me the satisfaction of an explanation,” he said shaking his head. “I just don’t get it. Everybody wants something out of reach. This is like finding a stash of cash on the sidewalk. You pick it up, you’re amazed at the amount, no one else is anywhere around. Do you put it down and walk away?”

“Sorry, Tarot,” I said. “My mind is made up.”

He continued. “Frankly, I’m mortified. If you morph me into a man, who knows what may follow?”

“This will be one hell of an experiment, my friend. Hang on to your hat.” I could see the stark terror in Tarot’s eyes. “Tarot, with all my goodwill and with highest hopes, I now wish for you to become human.”

What followed was an eerie scream. I tried to come up with a metaphor to describe it to Clara and Joe. I compared it to the shriek of a child suddenly frightened by a nightmare, or the yelp of a man in a forest attacked by a grizzly, or a soldier screaming after his legs are blown off in battle. Those sounds combined still did not capture the gut-wrenching din I heard.

After the racket, the silence was so thick I felt like I was being crushed. I gasped. Was I inhaling fire? My throat burned. Then, just as quickly, it was gone. The room seemed normal. My copy of the *Iliad* lay open, still to page 132, and Tarot was gone.

When Joe and Clara came over later, I said, “There was a scream when Tarot disappeared,” and at the word *screamed*, I shuddered.

Clara was holding my hand. “Keir, what’s the matter?”

“I was just reliving the moment, I guess.” Surely, I thought, Tarot must show up, somewhere, and soon. I waited for days that grew into a week. A second week I waited, and a third. Still nothing. After four weeks, I began to doubt I’d ever see Tarot again. Joe was peeved. “You wasted your wish. I would have done something with it. Now it’s gone and we’ll never know what became of it.”

What could I say? I said goodbye to Clara and Joe and flew out to Los Angeles for a meeting of humanities professors, thinking, *Perhaps when I return, we’ll meet Tarot, and our circle of friends will grow by one.*

Out of the 2,000 attending the conference, I joined about 30 for a Greek seminar. Some professors sleep through a lecture on the shades of differences between *agape*, *eros*, and *phileo*, but not me. The differences between divine love, human love, and brotherly love give insights to the Greek texts, all hidden behind the

word *love* in English translations. The presentation was basic Greek, but the speaker had some good illustrations.

In the middle of the lecture, a professor type—there is such a thing—probably a few years older than me, entered and sat next to me. He put down plastic bags filled with books like vendors hand out at these affairs in the hope one might catch a professor's eye, and they will either adopt it as a text or add it to their required reading list. The newcomer seemed as interested in the speaker's analysis as I was.

Afterwards, others left, but he stayed. Extending his hand, he said with a slight accent I was unable to identify, "Hi. I'm Professor Theodore Tarotolli, Teddy for short. I teach at Trent University. And you are . . ."

What did I just hear? Five 'T's? Theodore, Tarotolli, Teddy, teach, Trent? "I'm Keir McGregor," I said. "Greek literature is my field. I don't think we've met."

"No wonder. The number of people delving into Greek literature diminishes daily, don't you think?"

My heart skipped a beat. Did I dare ask? "Professor, tell me about your background, where you're from, and how you became interested in Greek literature."

"I was born in Italy. I went to school first in Switzerland, and then to Cambridge, where I read the classics. After graduating with honors, I received a letter inviting me to interview for a position at Trent. I was hired right off the bat, and they made me chairman of their humanities department."

"How long have you been teaching?"

"I just started this term."

"So, a year ago, you were at Cambridge?"

"Oddly enough, I'm not sure. Everything I've told you so far can be verified by documents I found among my things, but the details surrounding those documents have escaped my memory. One should know more about his past than one finds on papers in his suitcase, shouldn't one? A psychiatrist told me I had a rare form of amnesia that blocks out details of one's life but leaves one with the academic knowledge one has acquired. So, I am quite proficient in Greek even though I remember no details about my education or my past except what I find on transcripts and in legal documents.

"What about your name, Tarotolli?"

“I researched it on Ancestry.com. Apparently, my name is unique. If I have no children, the name will be lost to history so far as their records go.”

“Let me take you to dinner, Professor Tarotolli. We must get better acquainted.

