

Uncle Genie

Annie's family's new house was a bit old, but still in good condition. They'd gotten a great deal on the property and moved in less than a week ago. While her parents spent their time fixing it up the way they wanted, Annie, young girl that she was, set about exploring every nook and cranny she could find.

The house was brown painted wood, two-story, two bedrooms. But Annie was most interested in the attic space. So while the grown-ups mopped the kitchen, she snuck upstairs.

"Annie," her mom's voice chased her down. "Don't go dragging down a bunch of dust we'll have to clean up!"

So much for sneaking. "Okay, Mom!"

But Mom didn't say anything about not going into the attic.

Annie quietly pulled down the ladder, pausing to listen for any reaction. When she didn't hear anything, she climbed up the rungs and heaved open the trapdoor to the loft.

A cascade of dust came pouring down like a waterfall. Annie clamped her hands over her mouth, in part to keep the dust out of her throat, and in part to keep from coughing and alerting

Mom she'd just done the one thing she was told not to do. There'd be trouble if she found out.

But never mind that for now. She had an attic to explore!

Leaping eagerly from the ladder, Annie fumbled for a light switch. Finding none, she took her cell phone out of her pocket and used its screen to light her way. Not nearly as good as a flashlight, but better than nothing.

The space was empty except for a few boxes stacked against the back wall. Multiple layers of dust covered everything. A single rectangular window in the middle of the sloped ceiling provided a small area of natural light. Annie looked up at it and followed the beam of light down to where it touched a solitary wooden crate about two feet square.

"I wonder what's in that one?" Led by her curiosity, she crept over to it, blew the dust off the lid, and tried opening it. Too heavy, and bolted shut besides that. Annie walked around it in a circle, hoping for some other way in. On the opposite side from the trapdoor, she found it—a small circular hole she could peep through.

Shining her phone light, she closed one eye and put her other one to the hole. The crate looked empty but for a curved gold-looking form.

That's it. Now she *had* to get this thing open! There was no telling what was in there, but judging from the color, it was some sort of treasure for sure! But how to get the lid off?

Looking around once more, her gaze settled on a piece of metal about a foot long and curved at one end. She picked it up. It was pretty heavy, but she could lift it. Carrying it back to the crate, she stuck the curved end through the hole, hooked it inside, braced against the crate with her feet, and pulled.

"Hrrrrnngggghhhh..." Bit by bit the wood creaked, until finally, with the edges of the metal stick digging into her palm, a single shuck of the crate's side tore off and fell to the floor.

Annie winced, sure that her parents had heard. But no one called up to her from below, so she shrugged and re-inserted the stick for another attempt.

Five minutes later, hands thoroughly sore, Annie was staring at a half-circle hole in the crate big enough to reach her arm in. She did so, and her hand closed around what felt like the handle to a teapot. She really hoped it wasn't. Gold or not, teapots were boring.

She pulled the object out, and her jaw dropped. In her hands was a golden (dust-covered) lamp. The magic kind that genies always came out of when you rubbed them! She couldn't wait. Using the sleeve of her sweater, she rubbed the side of the lamp with her elbow.

A thick purple smoke rose out of the spout into the air and spread out into the shape of a person. A moment later, there he was; green pointy shoes, white pants, blue sleeveless vest, thin black goatee, tanned skin, and a jeweled and feathered round cloth thing on his head!

The genie waved his hand over his face and coughed loudly. "Where in the name of my turban am I?"

Annie grinned from ear to ear and opened her mouth to blurt out her first wish.

"Annie? I heard coughing. There better not be dust all over the place when I get up there!"

Oh no! The dust! She'd completely forgotten a bunch of it had fallen out of the attic! Worse, she could hear her mom's footsteps climbing up to the second floor! Think, Annie, think! There had to be some way, any way...

"Hey, girl. Chop-chop," the genie snapped his fingers, nose wrinkled from the dust in the attic. "You rubbed the lamp, right? You get three wishes. What'll it be first?"

That's it! She could wish the dust away! But, to use up a whole wish just for that?

"Annie," her mom's voice sounded closer. "Where are you?"

There was no time! "I wish all the dust was gone!"

The genie raised an eyebrow. "Really? That's all you want?"

"Annie! I'm not going to ask you again!"

Annie bit her nails, eyes wide. "Hurry!"

The genie shrugged, waved his hand, and snapped his fingers. There was a poofing sound and some more purple smoke, and all the dust in the attic and in the hallway below vanished, leaving everything spotless.

Her mom's face poked up through the open trapdoor. "What are you doing all the way up here in this filthy attic—" a second glance around cut her off. "Goodness, how did they get this place so clean?"

This was going to be awkward. "Uh, Mom," Annie started, motioning to the genie. "This is—" when she looked, however, the genie was gone.

Her mom looked at her in confusion. "This is what?"

"Uh," Annie rubbed her head. "Nothing, I guess."

Her mom shrugged and climbed back down the ladder, muttering about what a strange daughter she had.

When she was gone, Annie slumped back against the crate. "That was close. Hey mister genie, are you still here?"

No answer. The only evidence of the genie was his lamp, which sat now on the floor by the crate. Annie picked it up.

"Maybe I have to rub it again each time." She held it up and put her elbow to it.

"Annie, come on down. It's almost time for dinner," her dad called.

"Okay, Dad!" she shouted back.

Better hide the lamp so no one else finds it. Annie climbed down from the attic and went first to her new room. After stashing the lamp safely behind her pillow, she dashed down the stairs to eat.

Her first week in her new school was hard, mostly because the only thing she could think about was what to wish for. What had she been about to ask for back in the attic? She winced.

One had to be very careful when making wishes to a genie. It was real easy to end up with

something you didn't mean to wish for. And wishing for a hundred wishes never ever worked, so there were no do-overs.

Finally, it was Friday, and she was home from school for the weekend. Rushing up to her room, she fished the lamp out from its hiding place in her drawer—it hadn't made a very comfy pillow—and rubbed it.

The purple smoke wafted out from the top and the genie appeared again. "It certainly took you long enough," he said. "So then, next wish."

Annie waved her finger. "Not just yet. First, tell me your name."

"Name," the genie repeated. "Who knows, I haven't used it in centuries. Just call me Genie, I suppose."

"Okay, Genie," Annie plopped down on her bed. "Tell me where you and all the other genies come from."

Genie sighed heavily. "Fine. We are ghosts who are trapped by magicians and kings and put inside these lamps. Then we have to give them whatever they ask for. Our power comes from their magic, so after three wishes, that magic is used up and the lamp disappears until someone finds it and calls on us. Then it repeats over and over."

"That doesn't sound very fun."

"It isn't. And those lamps are very cramped."

Hm. Being a genie must be a hard life. Maybe she should use one of her wishes to do something good for him.

"Okay, I have my next wish. I wish for us to have the funnest time ever."

Genie waved his hands and called up the poof of smoke. It covered Annie's eyes, and when it went away, they were at a gigantic amusement park!

Annie squealed in delight. "Woopee! Let's go ride the roller coaster!" Dragging Genie by the hand, they got in line, which was mercifully short. The man at the ride entrance stopped

them.

“You don’t look related, sir. Is this girl yours?”

Annie stumbled. She was horrible at lying.

“No no, of course not,” Genie answered him. “I’m her uncle. Her parents had to work today and asked me to take her here.” He grinned and winked down at her.

One minute later they were whooping and hollering as the coaster car looped and turned and rose and plunged. The camera that took everyone’s pictures showed her with her arms high in the air, and Genie shouting excitedly.

“That was awesome, ‘Uncle Genie’!” Annie looked slyly up at him. “The haunted house next!”

After running half-scared and half-giddily through a hallway of ghouls and zombies, they came to a room with those twisted mirrors that make you look all silly. Genie stood in front of one that gave him the figure of a balloon. Annie pointed and cackled as Uncle Genie “hmped.”

The next stop was a cotton candy stand. It cost four dollars and Annie had no money. But uncle Genie pulled some out of his pocket that she was sure actually came out of his sleeve. Annie got strawberry and Genie got blueberry. When his was all gone, he shoved the stick into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed as onlookers gaped in disbelief. Annie was snorting so hard she couldn’t say anything, and all uncle Genie did was lick his lips and rub his belly.

She tried the ball-throwing game and only hit one target, not enough for a prize. But of course, Uncle Genie stepped in, juggled the balls for a moment, turned to face away from the targets, and tossed each ball over his shoulder. Every single one hit a bullseye, and Annie walked away with a giant stuffed bear. Uncle Genie flexed his fingers out in front of him before pretending to dust his hands off.

“The games are rigged,” he told her. “They make them so that genies can’t lose.” A cocky grin spread over his face.

“Okay, you decide what we do next,” Annie urged him.

Genie looked around. “Hmm. How about that show in the big tent?”

The show in question consisted of a pirate exploring an ancient island looking for treasure that turned out in the end to be a cheeseburger.

Exiting the tent, a man walked in front of them and bumped into a woman.

“Hey, he stole my wallet!” she cried as the man took off.

Annie thought fast and whispered in uncle Genie’s ear. He snickered and snapped his fingers.

“Hey, what the—” the thief was suddenly wearing a pink tutu. Annie and Genie ran around a corner and covered their mouths to keep from bursting as the crowd cornered the stunned thief and rescued the wallet.

The park was getting ready to close, but the two of them had enough time left to go up in the ferris wheel. Uncle Genie stopped it at the top so they could look out over the land.

“This is the best day ever, Uncle Genie.” Annie was so used to calling him that by now she didn’t even notice when she said it.

“Yeah,” Genie echoed as they sat in the stopped compartment atop the wheel, the whole world laid out before them. “You know, a lot of people wish for money or a bunch of stuff, or an easy life. Then they end up wasting it all and are mad because they didn’t get what they wanted. It’s not because we genies trick them. They wish for the wrong things in the first place. If you really want a good and fulfilling life, you have to have the discipline to change the things you don’t like. Sure you can wish for them to change, but the problem is, the world is constantly changing. It never stops, not for a moment. The trick is, you have to change with it.”

Annie nodded. “Do you think I’ve made good or bad wishes?” Her first one was just to clean up some dust. And this one was fun, but it wouldn’t last forever. Soon it would be just a memory.

“Annie,” Uncle Genie started, “I’ve granted a lot of wishes. And I’ve been around long enough to know why you wished for us to go here. Being a genie is a thankless life of servitude, of seeing others constantly fail to achieve what they want. But a wish made for someone else is never a waste. Whether or not that’s actually true doesn’t matter. It might not be. But even if just for a day, you’ve made a difference in my life.”

The tears streamed down Annie’s cheeks. After one more wish, Genie would have to go back to his lamp again until someone else used his magic for nothing. Worse, she’d never see him again. But she had to make a wish. That was the rule.

“I know what I want my last wish to be,” she said through the tears. No need for the lamp again. She’d make it now.

“I knew this was coming,” Genie said wistfully. “Anything you want, name it.”

Annie wiped her cheeks and made her wish...

Another boring school week passed. As before, Annie couldn’t wait to get home. This would be the first day he was coming to visit. She waited eagerly as a familiar figure walked up the patio and opened the front door to greet her parents, who, for all they knew, had known the visitor for ages. Annie yelled in glee and ran up to hug him as he bent down to receive her, smiling.

Those last words came back to her. “*I wish for Uncle Genie to stay.*”