

WISH CAKE

Judy Spencer

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A long time ago, far from here and now, there was a merchant who lived and prospered in a small town. He was kind and generous and doted on his wife and small daughter. “You are my jewel,” he would tell the child, “you are the true joy of my life.” Because she was so precious to him, he named her Pearl.

Pearl was lovely. Her hair was spun gold, her eyes as blue as the sea, her voice as sweet as the song of the lark. As she grew into a young woman of great beauty, her father’s fortune increased. All he touched turned to gold. He showered his wife and daughter with everything bright and shining. Before long young men began to pay suit to Pearl, seeking her hand in marriage, but none was worthy of her, at least not in her father’s eyes.

One day, a suitor came to the door. He was not someone from their town, but a stranger. His clothes were strange and his manner was stranger.

“What of that?” the merchant thought. “He must be a foreign prince. My Pearl is so beautiful that word of her loveliness has travelled the world over!”

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The merchant's wife was not so sure of the stranger. He had burning eyes, and he did not smile, not even when Pearl gave him a pretty curtsy, and invited him in.

No sooner had the stranger sat down than he proposed marriage to Pearl.

"You do not know me!" Pearl said, surprised. "I have not said more than a greeting at the door."

"What does that matter?" the stranger said, "I am fond of golden hair and pretty blue eyes. I have money enough to keep you as well if not better than your father does. Let us reach an agreement and marry."

The merchant's wife drew her husband aside. She knew he was a good, kind man, but he was a foolish one as well, too generous at times, and far too trusting. "Husband," she warned him, "this stranger has mischief in his heart. You must refuse him. Do not allow Pearl to go off with him."

"Mischief!" the merchant muttered, "I only want what is pure and good for my Pearl. I will send the stranger away."

But the stranger had overheard every word. "I have come for a wife, and this is the one I want. If you deny me, I will bring evil to your door."

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The merchant was very frightened. “What will happen now?” He asked his wife. “Perhaps we should listen to his suit. He might be a good husband.”

“A man who threatens his prospective in laws with damnation and curses can not possibly be a good husband,” the merchant’s wife said. “Send him away. Or I will whether you wish it or not.”

The merchant sent the stranger away, but his heart was more than heavy. Now, we are to suffer ills of all kinds!” He moaned.

It did not take long for evil to arrive.

The next day, the household awoke to bad news. A messenger arrived for the merchant. “Master,” he cried, “a terrible storm has come up without warning. All your ships are lost at sea!”

The merchant began to fret. He had made a lot of money, but he spent all that he made. If the ships were lost, his fortune was lost as well. “No matter,” the merchant’s wife said, soothingly, “Pearl has so many wealthy suitors, she has only to accept one. The dowry will be enough to see us through til luck returns to us.”

There was a terrible wail from Pearl’s bedroom. Both the merchant and his wife rushed to help their daughter, not knowing what they might find.

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There was a strange girl in Pearl's bed, wearing Pearl's nightgown, with Pearl's necklace around her neck. She had plain brown hair, and plain brown eyes, big hands and thick wrists.

The plain girl spoke with Pearl's voice. "Father, mother," she cried, "what has happened to me?"

In horror, they realized that Pearl had been transformed – the stranger had taken their wealth and Pearl's beauty. While she was in every other way the same person, her golden hair and sea-blue eyes were gone.

The word spread through the town that evil had befallen the merchant. He had lost his fortune and his daughter had lost her beauty. Those who had been jealous rejoiced in his misfortune. Those who had kind hearts but weak souls, stayed away. Those who knew evil has a way of staying for a while once it has found a target, stayed even farther away. The suitors stopped coming. In their place was a never-ending stream of creditors.

The merchant could not bear for his daughter to see the family brought low. "Come," he told her. "Before worse comes to worse, take what money we have left. Go to the next village and make your way in the world. With any luck, the curse will stay here with us."

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Pearl wept to leave her mother and father, but the merchant's wife echoed her husband's words. "My dear girl, for whatever reason fate has set your feet on a path away from us. I will give you something precious my mother gave to me. Make of it what you will. I only hope it will bring you the joy it brought me."

She pressed a little book into Pearl's hands. Pearl put the little book into a bundle with whatever possessions she could carry and set off on her way. Pearl walked and walked and walked until the town she had grown up in was far out of sight. Only then, did she stop to eat a modest meal of bread and cheese. She wept bitter tears for all she had left behind. Only when all her tears were spent, and her breath began to come easy again, did she think to open the little book her mother had given her.

Eagerly, she turned the pages only to find nothing of importance. "There is nothing here that can help me. It's just a recipe for cake. I'm sure it's very good cake, although it seems rather plain to me, but I don't see how this cake could have brought my mother joy."

With a heavy sigh, she put the book back in her pack, and walked on past orchards and farmland. It was well after the harvest, so the trees and fields were sleeping, waiting for spring. In the distance, she saw a shimmering castle, gleaming in the sunlight so that she could not see it

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clearly. “Curious,” Pearl said to herself, “there is no palace in these parts, but that certainly looks like one.”

Not long afterwards, she found herself in a village. She walked up and down the streets, watching people rushing along as they ran their errands. Some of them looked pleased with their lot in life. Many looked tired. A few looked terribly sad. “I wonder what my new face is saying,” Pearl wondered. “After all, I have only had this face for a very short time.”

Her feet came to a stop in front of a busy bakery. A bell over the front door sang merrily as customers streamed in and out of the door. Through the window, Pearl saw the girl at the counter busily wrapping up purchases. Behind her the baker pulled loaves out of the oven, setting them aside to cool.

“I have a recipe for cake,” Pearl thought, “and this is a bakery. If fate has brought the two of us together, so be it!”

She walked in, and asked to speak with the baker. Dusting his floury hands on his apron, the baker approached her with a weary step. “What do you want, girl?”

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Pearl had never been spoken to in that way. She had to remind herself that life was different now. “Sir, I would like to work for you here. I can bake, and I have a recipe for the most delicious cake.”

“No doubt it’s your mother’s recipe,” he sighed, “and it’s the best you ever had. “

“This cake is different,” Pearl insisted. “It’s a wish cake. Anyone who takes a bite will have their wish come true.”

“This village is surrounded by woods that are home to all manner of magical folk – they all promise to grant wishes, but every wish come true has a terrible price to pay. Here we do not want such wishes peddled.”

“But this wish cake is different,” Pearl said, “it will only grant the wish that will bring the wisher true joy. It will not grant a wish that will bring any ill harm.”

“That would certainly be different,” the baker had to admit. “Very well. I will give you a day. Bake your cake for me. If it sells, and IF it is as you say it is, I will give you another day.”

“Done,” Pearl agreed. Of course, she had not spent a great deal of her young life in the kitchen, but the little book had everything laid out in great detail – not only how to gauge the correct measure of sugar,

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butter, flour and vanilla, but how long to beat it, how the batter should look, and every other detail imaginable.

Once the cake was baked and cooled, she brought it over for the baker's inspection. "Ha!" He said, dismissing it with a wave. "A plain cake. It only makes sense that a plain girl should bake a plain cake. Still! A deal is a deal."

He put the cake in the window with a sign that said WISH CAKE.

A woman entered and eyed the cake with curiosity. "This cake grants wishes?"

"So I've been told," the baker said, "but I leave it to you to tell me how it turns out." He motioned for Pearl to serve the woman.

"This cake does indeed make wishes come true," Pearl said, wrapping up the slice of cake, "but remember, it will only grant the wish that will bring you true joy."

By the end of the day, all the cake had sold, but the baker was still unconvinced. "Wait til they all come back tomorrow, asking for their money back. Granting wishes is a bad business."

The next day the woman who had brought the first slice came back into the bakery. "You will see, my girl," the baker told Pearl.

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Instead of asking for her money back, the woman embraced Pearl with tears of joy in her eyes. “You will forever have my gratitude,” she said. “Your wish cake is indeed a marvel!”

“What did you wish for?” the astonished baker asked.

The woman looked to Pearl to make sure it would not negate the magic. When Pearl nodded, she told the baker her wish. “I wished to be loved passionately.”

“And the cake made that happen?” The baker knew the woman’s husband and he found it hard to believe that a slice of cake could change the very nature of a man.

“You will not believe it,” the woman said. “I took a bite, you know, it is a very plain cake and a little dry if you don’t mind my saying so, so I needed some milk. I went out to the barn to fetch some milk. There was my husband, tending the cows, as he does every day. He was singing to the cows! Of course, I said, dear husband, why are you singing to the cows?”

“Perhaps he sings poorly and the cows do not object,” the baker offered.

“No such thing!” the woman said, “It seems the cows like the singing and give more milk. But I had never heard him sing before, and

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his voice was so sweet, it made my heart melt. And all went well with us that night! Let me know when you bake wish cake again!”

The woman went away happily, but the baker was unconvinced. “It takes no magic for a husband a wife to be happy together,” he said.

“Sometimes it does,” Pearl said, “but let us see.”

An old woman came in next. She, too, thanked Pearl with all her heart.

Again, the baker asked what she had wished for.

“I wished to be young again,” the old woman said.

“And did it work?”the baker asked.

“Am I not as you see me now?” The woman said. “No, that would not have brought me joy, because when I was young I did not have my husband or my children, or my children’s children, or the contentment that age can bring when children are grown, and the tears you shed over them are a memory. No, the cake protected me from a wish that would not have given me joy.”

“I am beginning to see the wisdom of this cake,” the baker said.
“It is truly an amazing cake.”

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“So, it is,” the old woman said, “for last night, as I was thinking all that I have just told you, my eldest son came to visit and brought his wife, and their children. They stayed until the stars came out and we danced in the fields together and laughed. I felt younger than I did when I actually was young.”

It went on like that all day. The customers who had eaten the cake were happy. The ones who had not bought any cake the day before, wanted to know when the baker would offer wish cake again.

“You can work here one more day,” the baker said.

“I would like more than one more day,” Pearl said.

“Any girl who can bake a cake that is celebrated for both granting and NOT granting wishes makes me a little nervous,” the baker said, “Unless....”

“Yes?”

“I have a daughter,” the baker began, “a foolish, beautiful daughter who I love more than my own life. She has taken it into her head that she is in love with the prince of this land. If she cannot marry him, she has decided to die. She lies in her bed and will neither eat or drink or do anything other than stare out the window in the general direction of the castle.”

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“And does the prince not love her back?” Pearl asked.

“The prince has never met her,” the baker said, “and she has never met him. But she has read many, many books and they all have princes marrying common girls, and she has decided this is to be her fate, or she will die. Now, you are a plain girl and probably not given to such silliness, but perhaps you can talk some sense into her.”

“Perhaps I can,” Pearl said.

“Restore my Floral to me, and you’ll have a job here as long as you want it,” the baker said. “Whether that cake of yours can grant wishes, solve riddles, or shear sheep, I do not care.”

“Done,” Pearl said.

The next morning, Pearl came to the baker’s house before day had bloomed. She was admitted, and went upstairs to where the baker’s daughter lay motionless. She was very beautiful. Her hair was dark but her eyes were a pale green.

I was prettier still, Pearl thought, with a pang in her heart for her lost beauty. Yet, she could not find it in herself to hate the girl, and she had much to gain if she was successful in helping her.

The first thing she did was draw the curtains aside and open the window. The room faced east and the morning sun flooded the room.

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The baker's daughter turned her face to the wall. "It is too bright. Close the curtains."

"You have chosen to die," Pearl said, "what does it matter if the sun is in your eyes?"

"I would like my last few hours on earth to be pleasant."

"That makes no sense," Pearl said, "but let's move on. Why exactly do you want to die?"

"Because love is worth dying for," the baker's daughter says, "and when I am gone, the prince will hear how I died for love of him and he will feel sorry to have missed what was surely the great love of his life."

"There are some flaws in your plan," Pearl said, "but for now, let's pretend you have come up with something worthwhile. I am here to grant your wish."

"Are you a genie?" The girl sat up excitedly. "Or an evil spirit?"

"No, but I've met one," Pearl said. "At any rate, here is how the magic works." She explained the Wish Cake.

"Will this cake bring my prince to me?" Flora asked.

"If that is what will bring you true joy, I believe it will," Pearl told her. She unwrapped the slice of cake and gave it to Flora. "Before you

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eat, I must ask you something. When I was on my way to your village, I saw a shining palace, so bright it was almost like looking at the sun. Is that the palace of your prince?”

“No,” Flora said with wide eyes. “The Royal Palace is far away from here- days and days away. Here there are only orchards and farms.”

“Curious,” Pearl mused. “I know I saw a palace. Perhaps there is another prince in your neighborhood?”

“I would know,” Flora said, “in my heart, I would be able to sense the presence of royalty anywhere near me.”

“That is a useful skill,” Pearl nodded. “I will get you some tea for the cake – it’s good, but it’s a little dry.”

When Pearl returned with the tea tray, she also had a small dish of pears and a posy of fresh flowers.

“Fresh flowers?” Flora marvelled. “That is not possible this time of year!”

“So I thought as well,” Pearl agreed, “but the explanation is right outside your door.” She opened the door to reveal a young man, hat in hand. He was young enough, and handsome enough, and smiled shyly at Flora.

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Flora was mystified. “But this is James, who has an orchard outside town. We have known each other forever.”

“What luck you have,” Pearl told the girl, “to have a neighbor who can grow pears and flowers all year round. I would not have thought such a thing possible.”

“It is simple,” James said. “I have built a glass palace which holds the heat of the sun. Even on the coldest day it is as warm as summer and my plants are fooled into blooming and bearing fruit.”

“A glass palace!” Flora breathed. “It must be beautiful.” She took a bite of the pear. “It’s as sweet as anything I have ever had!”

Flora and the farmer chatted pleasantly for a while. After the young man had taken his leave, Pearl turned to the girl, who was smiling to herself.

“You seem much happier now,” Pearl said. “Can it be that you have decided not to die for love of the royal prince?”

“I have,” Flora smiled, “for the wish cake will bring the royal prince to me!”

“Only,” Pearl warned her, “if that is what will bring you true joy.”

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The next day, Flora got out of bed and dressed in her finest clothes, but the prince did not come, and neither did James the farmer. The day after that, Flora again dressed herself in her most beautiful gown, and waited. When the sun had set on another day with no prince and no James, Flora sent for Pearl.

“The prince has not come,” Flora sighed. “Is it possible that the prince will not bring me true joy?”

“How could I know that?” Pearl said. “I am just a person who bakes cake.”

“What would life be like if I married the prince anyway?” Flora said, half to herself. “It might be difficult. People always want to assassinate royalty. There are always foreign spies, and evil prime ministers, and jealous princelings. Not to mention poisonings! I’ve read about such things in books.”

“But if you love the prince and he will bring you joy, I suppose getting poisoned along with him is a reasonable price to pay,” said Pearl.

Flora said nothing, but when she stood to look out the window, she faced east, towards the pear orchards and the glass palace that kept the plants warm.

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The next day, she rose and dressed as before. Again, the prince did not come and James the farmer did not come. Again, Flora sent for Pearl.

Pearl arrived, and this time she did not have wish cake with her. She had a pear tart. As soon as the tiniest morsel of tart touched Flora's lips, she burst into tears.

"What's the matter?" Pearl asked. "Is it not well made? I thought it was cooked right and nicely formed."

"Oh, it's lovely," Flora said, "but it made me think of James. Why hasn't he come to see me?"

"He will not come to see you," Pearl said gently. "He bought some wish cake and his wish is to be loved by a girl who will love only him. *You*," she reminded Flora, "love only the royal Prince."

With that, Flora sprang to her feet and ran out the door. The baker who had been listening through the kitchen door, ran after her, shouting to Pearl, "what have you done?"

Pearl ran after the baker and the baker's daughter, but Flora was very fast and she reached the pear orchard before them. She found James tending his pear trees in the orchard. He looked at her in surprise.

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“Have you come for more pears? I could have brought them to you, there was no need to come all this way.”

Flora caught her breath. “I came to see the Prince of Pears and his palace of glass where it is summer all year round.”

James looked around in confusion. “Where? Where is the Prince?”

“He is here in front of me,” said Flora, “the only Prince I have been waiting for, the one I have known all my life.” She took his hand and together they walked off towards the glass palace.

Pearl and the baker arrived out of breath, just in time to see Flora and James walking away through the orchard.

“This is nothing but good for me!” said the baker. “I shall have a fine son-in-law and soon we will be selling pear tarts, pear cakes, and pear muffins at my bakery!”

“Well,” thought Pearl, “I suppose having a happy father-in-law will be good for James, and Flora has her Prince of Pears, so this is a good turn of events.”

So all was happy in the baker’s house and the bakery, where the cakes and pies and tarts flew out the doors in the arms of the customers. They came for Wish Cake, but they bought the sweet-smelling cakes, and the warm bread. Pearl did not bake Wish Cake every day, or even

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every week, but when she did bake Wish Cake it sold quickly. Pearl soon had enough money to buy herself a little house not too far from the bakery and not too far from James' farm, so Pearl could visit with Flora and James, which she did very often.

One night, as Pearl was walking back to her house from the farm, she was set upon by a pair of thieves. They galloped up, swept her off the path, and rode off with her into the dark woods. Before Pearl could cry out for help, one of the thieves tied a scarf around her mouth and eyes so that she could not speak or see.

Her heart pounded and she was very afraid. The woods were filled with magical folk as well as thieves. Pearl wanted nothing to do with either of them.

At last, the thieves stopped to make camp and build a fire. They took the scarf off so that Pearl could see the two thieves. They were very fierce looking with scowling faces and knives at their belts.

“What do you want with me?” Pearl asked, trying to sound brave. “I am just a baker.”

“We want,” said one of the thieves, “your jewels, your money, anything of value that you have.”

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Pearl gave them what she had, but she wore no jewelry and carried very little money. The thieves were angry because they had gone to a great deal of trouble to kidnap Pearl and did not like that they had so little to show for it.

The two thieves began to talk about what they should do with Pearl. “We can ransom her back to her family.”

“I have none,” Pearl said, “well, none that I know their whereabouts.”

“Have you no other kin? No aunts, uncles, a husband or two?”

“I have none of that,” Pearl said.

“Well, then,” said one of the thieves, “we will have to kill you, because we are, after all, thieves. A life is just another thing to steal.”

“That cannot be an occupation with much of a future,” Pearl said, trying to think her away out of a bad situation, “surely you must wish for something better for yourselves.”

“No,” the other thief said, “we like being thieves. We are suited to the task. There must be evil in the world as well as good, as we are content to be the evil.”

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But before the thieves could do anything, there was a terrible noise in the woods, like the roar of a great beast. The sky lit up with a flash of fire, and the trees began to tremble with the approach of something large and terrible. Above the trees rose the head of a huge dragon!

With a terrified cry, the thieves got on their horses and rode away, far from the beast, leaving Pearl alone. “I do not think I can outrun a dragon,” Pearl thought to herself. She grabbed a stick to defend herself.

At long last, the dragon appeared before her. She could just see its great head just at the edge of the firelight.

“Are they gone?” asked the dragon, in the most ordinary voice. I was very afraid of them.”

Pearl put down the stick. She watched in amazement as the dragon came closer. It was not a dragon at all, but a man and a woman inside a costume of a dragon.

When they put aside the costume to show themselves, Pearl began to weep tears of joy because she saw her own mother and father.

“Are you harmed, miss?” her mother asked, not recognizing her own daughter.

Pearl’s heart sank. Her own parents did not know her. The tears she now shed were bitter. She felt herself to be all alone in the world.

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They were soon joined by a small group of men and women who came out of the woods with a wagon, and a big sheet of tin that made a noise like thunder. “We are players,” one of the women said, “we go from town to town and tell stories of kings and queens, and milkmaids and magic. You are lucky we came along and scared away those thieves.”

“Oh, I am grateful,” Pearl said, “and your dragon is very convincing.”

Pearl’s mother might not have recognized her daughter’s face, but she knew her voice at once. “My Pearl,” she cried, “it is you!” And she embraced Pearl and showered kisses on her face.

Her father lifted a lantern high to better see Pearl’s face. When he looked into her eyes, he, too, saw the child he had loved all of her life. Pearl told them about her life at the bakery, and asked. “How do you come to be with a company of players?”

“Once we no longer had a home and a business and a life in the village,” her mother began, “we decided to find what work we could and set upon the road to do just that. We saw this company performing a wonderful story about a fearsome dragon and a brave knight and a clever princess.... or was it a brave princess and a clever knight? No matter, we

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saw that their dragon costume was in need of repair, as was many of their costumes, and before you know it, we were one of the company and have been travelling with them ever since!”

“Yes,” her father said, “now we perform as well as mend costumes, and it seems to be it is much better to pretend to be a king than to actually be one – much less responsibility. It seems we are quite content.”

The players performed for Pearl their favorite stories. She marvelled at the illusion of the dragon, the fine costumes, the excitement of each story. The sun was just beginning to rise as they finished their last story.

“It is time for us to go on our way,” Pearl’s mother said, and gave her daughter a last embrace. They agreed to meet in a year when the players would come around to the village again.

And so, the time passed.

Pearl was very busy. The bakery flourished. James the farmer and Flora the baker’s daughter, had many children, and they all liked to visit Pearl. The baker had become a very good friend After work each day, they would have tea and talk about the day. And once a year, when the

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players came to town, Pearl saw her dear mother and father, who were very happy indeed with their lives as travelling players.

She was just washing up her breakfast dishes one morning when she heard an odd noise outside her door. She opened the door to see the stranger who had cursed her years before, taking her father's fortune and her beauty. "Will you allow me in?" he asked.

"That did not go so well for me the first time we met," Pearl said. "You can say what you came to say from there."

"Very well," the stranger said, "I have come to undo what I have done. If you wish it, I will restore your father's fortunes, and your beauty. It's your choice."

"Come back tomorrow at this time," Pearl said, "and I will give you my answer."

As soon as the stranger had gone, Pearl went to see her parents who were in the village performing. She told them that the stranger had reappeared and related to them his offer. "All can be as it was," she told her mother and father, "just say the word, and your fortunes will be restored."

"I think we are better off where we are now," her mother said.

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Her father added, “It’s possible we aren’t very good with money. It seems to bring out a peculiar side to our natures. No, daughter, we do not want our fortune back.”

“Should I ask for my beauty back?” Pearl wondered. “You know and love me better than anyone. What should I do?”

“I can not tell you what to do,” her father said, “at first, I missed the way you looked. But when I look into your eyes, I see the child I have always loved. There is no difference. You are still my moon and stars, my sky and sea. Nothing changes that. “

Her mother embraced her. “I love you as you were, I love you as you are, “ her mother said, “and I will love you as you will be.”

With that, Pearl went home to wait for the stranger.

He arrived at the appointed time. This time she let him in and offered him a comfortable seat.

“Give me your decision,” the stranger said.

“Thank you,” said Pearl, “but no. I do not want my beauty, and my mother and father do not want their fortune back. But I do want something of you.”

“I am in the mood to listen,” the stranger said.

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“How have you been, these last few years?” Pearl asked.

“Oh, you know, “the stranger said, “more of the same. I’m sure there are other things I could do with my time, but there must be evil in the world.”

“So, I’ve heard,” Pearl nodded, “but sometimes I wonder about things. I’d like to give you something.” With that, she gave him the book her mother had given her, containing the recipe for Wish Cake. “In case you have been thinking about going into a different line of work. Just a suggestion.”

The END