

## *Dream Lover*

Once upon a time, there were two men who made a wish; and had it come true.

Chuck McDonough and Jeff Greene lived in Manhattan, in the East-East Village, not too many years ago. Borrowing the Morse code of personal ads (which they'd both placed at times, without success), Chuck was "GWM, 28; 6'2", 210#, brn. hair/beard, brn. eyes"; and Jeff "GWM, 26; 6'1", 185#, blond hair/green eyes." Chuck was mechanic at a printing plant on East 8<sup>th</sup>. Jeff was a masseur and trainer at Caracalla, a gym on Avenue A; and lunchtime waiter at a midtown restaurant. They didn't know each other except vaguely by sight, from bars, the Metropolitan Community Church, the Pride parades, mutual friends' parties and so forth. Yet one night they both wished for a lover; and on awakening the next morning they *were* lovers, as romantically as in an old song. How on earth did that happen?

Pause a moment, and speculate on the metaphysics of how wishes might be granted. Since Manhattan is the setting, envision a sort of celestial corporate-strategy session. Imagine a midtown office building – name it, say, Olympia Tower – one of those new "postmodern" ones, bastard child of Donald Trump out of Philip Johnson, midwived by Giuliani: all glass and steel from the avenue up, but with a neo-psuedo-Graeco-Roman temple-thingie perched decoratively on top. There in a lofty conference room, the deities and entities are gathered.

Venus is present, of course, as the matter at hand concerns Love. Cupid heralds her entrance with the Frankie Avalon oldie "Venus". "*Venus; Goddess of love that you are; Surely the things I ask; Can't be too great a task....*" Pan rolls his eyes at this extravagance, and tootles a disrespectful obbligato on his flute. Coyote Trickster sits contemplating plot complications. A Fairy Godmother stands ready to advise on means of direct intervention, should it be needed. There is also a dark dour figure, who may embody Morality; or Mortality, or Professor Moriarity; or the Devil's Advocate – anyway, he is the one who binds granted wishes about with limits and clauses, such as "Be home by midnight" or "Never untie the ribbon round my neck".

Mercury-messenger-of-the-gods wheels in an elegant Fifties jukebox, agleam with chrome and neon. The silver wings on his helmet and heels flutter slightly as he moves. He touches a button, and in the display window the circumstances of the wish are replayed:

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The first Sunday in January Chuck had gone to dinner with his family. His parents ran a not-too-successful motel in Point Pleasant, on the Jersey shore. Mr. McDonough had a hobby of grumbling about life's raw deals. Carol, the older sister, had an assistant-pastor husband and unpleasant Fundamentalist ideas. She disapproved of Chuck's sexuality, and sometimes said so. Sister Audrey defended her big brother, but in turn badgered him for support in her struggle to assume the family business (Mr. McDonough considered innkeeping an unsuitable job for his little girl). Mrs. McDonough ate a lot; and like Rodney King wished they all could just get along. Chuck ranked family dinners as a pleasure about equal to drowning in quicksand. (To make matters worse, his dad still called him "Charlie".)

Over dinner Chuck's mother, with her unique talent for non sequiturs and flashpoint topics, asked Chuck if he was "seeing anyone". At the tone of her voice, both timid and patronizing, he was instantly thirteen again, plagued with zits and traumatized by secret desires for other boys. He hated when she did that. He wanted to reply "No; but I sucked off all the Knicks and their coach, and Spike Lee for good measure"; but managed to restrain himself. He feared she might stare blankly and ask what "suck off" meant.

That set Audrey to talking about her fellow clerk at the Ben Franklin, who'd just had to dump his boyfriend for cheating: he was a sweet guy, and Chuck might ask him out sometime. He had a circle of friends, too, who were equally nice and equally single....Carol, with her best look of virtuous disapproval, wrangled the topic round to her own husband, and his latest doctrinal successes with the Sunday-school moppets. Mr. McDonough meanwhile demanded of his wife "What'd you put in this meatloaf?"; and his wife dithered and apologized and assured him no, the meat hadn't gone off, she'd made sure to check the date.

On the train back to town, a fellow passenger's walkman was leaking an oldies station. "*Whenever I want you, all I have to do; Is dream....*" Chuck wondered. Was there a lover somewhere out there, who could handle not only him but his surreal family, there in their motel with its shabby, didn't-they-find-a-dismembered-corpse-here atmosphere? Such a man would need the quick wit and strong nerves of, say, Nick and Nora Charles, or Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, or John Steed and Mrs. Peel. Even Philip Marlowe would do passing well, with his wisecracks and faint homo subtexts. Chuck looked out the window but saw only his own hollow silhouette, superimposed on falling snow and dark lurching landscape.

In his apartment on East 13<sup>th</sup>, he made hot chocolate with peppermint schnapps, and read some Raymond Chandler. Neither improved his mood much. “It only made me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again,” he quoted to himself, and went to bed. The clock read “12:12:12” as he turned out the light. He lay there with the un-original thought that, should he die before he waked, the city out there wouldn’t even notice, much less give a damn. Nick and Nora, Peter and Harriet, Steed and Emma....”I wish I had a husband,” he thought.

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Jeff had gone to Long Island with his friends Keith and Kevin, to Keith’s sister Yvonne and her husband Vince. They grilled steaks, watched the Knicks game on wide-screen TV, and afterwards went to a bar Vince had discovered – a rowdy fun place, with a fire in a fireplace, and a guy at an upright piano playing great roadhouse tunes, and a streamlined machine on the counter which turned out the best Irish coffees in the county, if not the whole state. They all got happily lit except for Kevin, who was driving.

The booth held only four, so Keith sat himself down on Kevin’s lap. This set off a bout of playful wrestling. “P.D.A! P.D.A!” Jeff exclaimed. “Isn’t it gross?” Yvonne added. “You couldn’t separate them with a crowbar.” Keith stuck out his tongue at Jeff, and told his sister “He’s just jealous ‘cause I’ve got me a Man.”

“Von’s who I’d be jealous of,” Jeff replied. “She’s got Mr. Tall Dark Handsome there, Mr. Italian Stud.” Vince was blushing. “Any more like you at home?” Kevin asked him.

“Yeah, but they’re all married.”

“How about a boy on the side?” Keith perkily suggested. “No no no,” Jeff waved a hand. “Not for me. Been there, done that, have the scars.”

“This guy a stud??” said Yvonne, one arm round her husband. “Five years I go with this guy before he even thinks to propose. I had to get him drunk so he’d do it.”

“The hell you did. I got *you* drunk so you’d say yes.”

“What happened when you sobered up?” Jeff asked.

“By then they *had* to get married,” Keith laughed. Yvonne gave him a lofty look. “He made an honest woman outa me; but *nobody* could make an honest man out of you.” Jeff laughed. “I’ll drink to that,” he said, and clinked mugs with her. “That’s just how I like him,” Kevin announced.

“I’ll drink to that too.”

“You like Italian guys,” Vince said to Jeff.”

“I like guys,” came the reply. “Looks are kind of important, you know; but more, they have to be smart, they have to have a job, they have to have a life –“

“They have to have at least eight inches,” Keith put in.

“- which is why you never qualified, you’re five inches too short.” Yvonne gave a whoop of laughter. “They can’t be psycho; or they can’t be any crazier than me, put it that way. So they have to be out, naturally. And they have to be – for instance, if we’re driving somewhere in the middle of nowhere and have a flat. He can’t run around screaming ‘Oh my god, oh my god, what’re we gonna do?!’ Because *I* do that. I want him to just say ‘Goddammit, we’ve got a flat,’ and then fix it.”

When they came out they found the full moon gone behind clouds and a wonderful light snow falling. Kevin drove, while Keith searched the radio for songs to sing along with...past a New Age call-in show, with some amateur astrologer (Larry from North Carolina) asking about a rare conjunction of planets; then punk, salsa, Mozart, reggae, the BBC News; then some oldies station – “*Someday (some sweet day), We’ll be together....*” Keith lay his head on Kevin’s shoulder; Kevin’s hand came up to stroke Keith’s hair. 12:12:12, read the dashboard clock.

In the back seat Jeff thought, “They’re so sweet; they’re really, really in love with each other”. A moment of loneliness crossed his heart. “I wish I had a husband...”

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In the empyrean conference room, in balances calibrated by Osiris to the finest feather-light gradations, the pros and cons are weighed.

The dark constringer rises first. Two men, miles apart and unknown to one another, making the same wish at the exact same moment: a remarkable and rare coincidence, he allows; but still only coincidence, hardly worthy of Olypian notice or favor. Furthermore, the “wish” was not a true wish, but a mere exercise in the rhetoric of longing. Neither man really expects it to come true. They live in the twentieth century – they don’t believe in magic.

In favor, Venus speaks (while Cupid plays his lute) of a new year, a full moon, the elemental magic of new-fallen snow; and the rare planetary conjunction, which – though neither man believes in astrology – favorably aligns their “houses”. The Fairy Godmother also notes (as Pan tips her a wink and a nod) that both men carry in their heritage an affinity for the supernatural. The Greene and McDonough family trees each bear various relatives worthy of

study by the Fortean Society: Spiritualist mediums and “wise women” and odd fey types who, when something goes Bump in the night, instinctively know what, or Who, it is; and can even sometimes make small talk with It. (And Jeff, if he witnessed true magic, would believe it without a qualm; and the lonely little boy Chuck once was still wishes, in the grown man’s heart, that magic did exist....)

A consensus is reached. A gamble is taken, an experiment set working. Mercury is dispatched with instructions to the appropriate departments. Cupid touches a button on the jukebox. *“Mister Sandman; Bring me a dream....”*

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Chuck and Jeff dreamed that they were lovers. They dreamed they were sleeping together, side by side, with the comfortable familiarity of people who’ve been together a long time and plan to be together for the rest of happily-ever-after. They lay there, enjoying each other’s presence. Dawn came; and slowly they opened their eyes. And Reality came blundering in, like Housekeeping when one’s forgotten to put out the DO NOT DISTURB card.

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Chuck silenced the alarm, then reached to touch Jeff and assure him he needn’t get up. His hand fell on empty air. He sat bolt upright, blinking, and thought “Where’s Jeff?”

“Who’s Jeff?” replied Reality, still blundering round the back of his mind. Then another source answered *Geoffrey Alan Greene. He is my husband; the one I wished for last night. My wish has been granted.*

Chuck did not like having such dialogues in his head. He rose, paced, summoned all his resources of reason and logic. “This Jeff guy, whoever he is,” he thought (and had to admit, the name did sound familiar) “- of course he’s not here, he doesn’t live here. He couldn’t. Look at this dump – there’s barely room to swing a New York rat, let alone a husband. *(He’d be still lying in bed now, yawning, grinning, talking about what we’ll do tonight after work. He’d be stretching in all directions – those long wiry arms with their strong hands. Blond hair on the pillow; darker hair under his arms, and running from navel down to where his cock lies across one flank...)*

Chuck’s own member was rising in appreciation. “You stay outa this,” he told it. He grabbed the phone book. Of course there were several pages of Greenes, and several dozen variants of Geoffrey. “Just as well,” he thought. “What would I tell him? ‘Hi – you don’t know

me; but I wished for a husband last night, and they gave me You. Wanna go to IKEA and pick out china patterns?" " (He'd love it. He'd think it totally screwy, and love it. He'd throw back his head and laugh with delight, flashing those green eyes at me. "Let's go!" he'd say.)

Well. Whoever "they" were, whatever deities or entities had granted his wish, they sure as hell did a sorry-ass job – leaving him, a mere mortal, to untangle the logistics. "And if you *did* grant me a husband," Chuck reasonably and logically demanded, "where the hell IS he??"

*(If he woke and found me gone, he'd search for me. He'd look everywhere, call everyone – my job, my friends; even, God forbid, my parents....)*

He saw if he spent any more time in metaphysical speculation he'd be late for work. Over lunch he could call various friends to ask if they knew a Jeff Greene. If they did, and if a meeting could be arranged; and *if* this person resembled the Jeff-Greene-of-his-dreams....well, *then* he could go with reason and logic.

Just then, the radio came back on (he'd hit SNOOZE instead of OFF). "Please Mr. Postman, look and see; If there's a letter, a letter for me...." He slapped it into silence.

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Jeff yawned and stretched, one arm reaching to give Chuck a good-morning hug. His hand found the edge of the bed, but no husband. "Chuck?" he asked, opening his eyes. Chuck wasn't there. Jeff pulled on boxers and went to the kitchenette. Melissa was staring impatiently at the coffeepot while gnawing on a breakfast biscuit.

"Where's Chuck?"

"Who??" she stared back.

"Chuck."

"Don't know what you're talking about. You bring somebody home last night?" She made a moue of distaste.

The coffeepot signaled readiness. She poured travel mugs for herself and her boyfriend Tad, handing it to him as he emerged wet-haired from the shower. Jeff was about to say "You seen Chuck?"; but Tad's face reminded him that Tad did not wake up at all easily. "He reverts to a primitive life form mornings," Chuck had said. "He needs the caffeine to re-evolve – "

Wait a minute. Had said, or would say? Had he told Chuck about his roommates? Wait a minute part two – who *was* Chuck?

*(Charles Eliot McDonough. He is my husband, the husband I wished for last night. My wish has been granted.)*

What the *hell* was going on?

Jeff returned to his room, staring at the empty bed as if it knew something. *(He'd be just getting up, smiling at me as he talked – that little half-smile, that dry humor that always cracks me up. Dark brown eyes, shy-little-boy eyes, that're the first to show when he's hurt or sad. Dark hair and trim beard; big sturdy body; nice hairy chest to nuzzle in. His morning boner, thick and stubby and sticking straight out like a torpedo....)*

Damn. This was way, way screwy. He'd have to think. Did Melissa leave any coffee? No, of course not. The later she was, the more she drank, as if caffeine could expand time. One morning she'd overslept, and run out still clutching the pot. "Of course, this being New York," Chuck went on, "the sight of a woman in full business getup carrying a coffeepot didn't turn a single head. Though I can imagine people pushing their mugs at her, saying 'Hey lady, fill me up!'....She could become one of those New York eccentrics: the Coffee Lady, arriving in the nick of time. She could wear a red cape with a coffee plant on it...." Jeff could hear the quiet noncommittal voice, see the hand gesturing as Chuck told the story.

Jeff knew Chuck had never told him that story. He also knew, in the way he knew certainties like gravity or sunrise or Melissa drinking all the coffee, that it was exactly the kind of story Chuck would tell, and exactly the way he would tell it. "Yeah;" Jeff thought, "so if he *is* my dream-come-true boyfriend, then where the hell IS he??"

The phone book listed a C.E. McDonough on East 13<sup>th</sup>. The number rang thrice, and an answering machine picked up. "Hi, this is Chuck. Please leave a message." Jeff's heart leapt. *That's him! That's him!* "Beep!" said the machine, and waited. Jeff found himself, for once, completely at a loss for words. He hung up and laughed. "I'm NOT totally nuts!" A Chuck McDonough did actually exist, with an address, a phone, and a voice. Maybe some of my friends know him – Keith and Kevin, or Shaun. Yeah, Shaun; Mr. Party Central, Mr. Gossip. I'll call him from the gym.

Melissa in superhero drag, running down the street pouring coffee on people. The more Jeff pictured it, the more he grinned.

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Round the conference table, all are looking at Pan. The dour moralitarian wonders, are the gross sexual visions truly required? Pan flips him the finger with a leer, and touches a button. *“My baby does the Hanky-Panky....”*

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Shaun had a loft, a trust fund, and a penchant for large parties. Yes indeed, he told Jeff, he knew a Chuck McDonough; who was single, strong, handsome, dark-haired and bearded, single, employed at Holland Printing on East 8<sup>th</sup>, a regular at church, apparently sane, single...Shaun also had a fondness for gossip; hence was delighted to inform Chuck an hour later that a Jeff Greene not only existed, but had called that same morning in search of Chuck McDonoughs. Jeff was, by the way, single, tall, blond, incredibly handsome, single, a masseur at Caracalla on Avenue A, lots of fun, single...An hour after that, before leaving for the restaurant, Jeff called Holland Printing. Chuck was out making deliveries, they said – did he want they should leave a message? He declined. He felt the same as when he was sailing and the wind picked up, sending the boat speeding almost out of control; that balance between fear and thrill. Chuck existed. Chuck’s description matched his dream. If they met, what would happen? Would they actually fall in love? – like, with violins playing and rainbows rainbowing and Shaun scattering flowers (and Melissa pouring coffee?) Or would Chuck think Jeff was crazy-weird and run away? He hurried uptown.

(Shaun, meanwhile, left a message at the gym informing Jeff of Chuck’s enquiries; then began laying plans for their engagement party.)

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Chuck cursed the midtown lunch-hour traffic; the ungainly truck; potholes and construction; current and previous Mayors (even ones he’d voted for); the delivery driver who’d called in sick (goddamn hypochondriac), thus putting Chuck behind the wheel. He had some choice words as well for the deities and entities etc. who were messing with his reality. The s.o.b.s – had they or hadn’t they granted his wish?? Jeff existed, and sounded like the guy in his dream, and apparently was even looking for him. What would happen if they met? What the hell was going on?? He imagined the d’s and e’s playing Pong with his mind, and laughing themselves silly.

He parked, shouldered the heavy box of menus and napkins, banged into the restaurant – and there found Jeff standing before him, in waiter drag.



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They recognized each other straightaway. They were astonished, to say the least. They stared at each other, green eyes and brown, for a second that seemed like an eon. (A clock on the maitre d's stand read "12:12:12.") Each had the same thought: *What's he going to do?*

The chef was frowning from the kitchen door; a diner waiting irritably, fingers tapping, at a table. The maitre d' approached, her expression presaging bitchy remarks. Chuck dumped the heavy box in her arms, and said "One for lunch, please." Jeff broke into a grin, and grabbed a menu.

"Cassoulet Oliver and tonic water with lime, please," Chuck said. He continued to hold the menu open as if studying it. He looked up at Jeff and waited. He thought, *He's psyched. Scared, yes; but really excited too – he can't stop smiling.* "Cassoulet; tonic with lime," Jeff repeated. He stood by as if waiting while Chuck studied the menu. He thought, *He knows something's up. His hands are steady but he's trembling inside – I can see it in his eyes. But he's cautious, he won't take the first step.*

"Uh...is your name Chuck?" Jeff asked.

Chuck looked steadily at him. "Yes. Chuck McDonough."

Jeff wanted to shout with relief. "I knew it! So you know my friend Shaun Gomez?"

"Oh yeah. Shaun the walking gossip column. Are you...by any chance Jeff Greene?"

"That's me." Jeff's smile was immense.

Chuck had never felt such exhilaration in his life. He had taken a flying leap of faith off the cliff, and he had landed safely.

The maitre d', looking even more annoyed, staggered past with the box. "What time do you get off?" Chuck continued.

"Two, but I gotta go back to the gym. I'm free at 5:30; come and I'll give you a massage. Free introductory offer."

"I'd be a fool to turn down a free massage." Chuck handed back the menu and reached for the crackers.

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Venus beams with success, Cupid reflecting her glow. The Fairy Godmother, in a silver dance card, notes down Shaun as a possible ally. Pan conjures up images from gay porn, a fantasy of masseur and client. The dark advocate casts the shadow of his hand upon them. The

opera is not yet over, he opines, the fat lady has not yet sung. Trickster ponders possible hindrances. A space-alien attack à la *Independence Day*? No; too over-the-top. Perhaps a broken press to keep Chuck overtime, or a last-minute client for Jeff? He and the dark one confer. The jukebox plays an incoherent jumble, like a radio on random search.

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At five-thirty that evening, Chuck and Jeff faced each other in a massage room at Caracalla. No broken presses, last-minute clients, or alien attacks had thwarted their meeting. So they looked at each other, brown eyes and green; and Chuck said “So tell me about this dream of yours.”

Jeff leaned forward and grabbed his arm. “First let me ask you: did you make a wish last night?” Chuck blinked at him, surprised as much by the eager touch as much as the query. “Because I did,” Jeff added, encouraging.

“Well, yes,” Chuck admitted.

“What was it? Please tell me.”

“Well; I’d come back from – Long story short, I was alone in my apartment feeling sorry for myself – it’s a hobby of mine – and I wished-“ he looked away – “that I had a husband.” He felt Jeff’s grip tighten, saw Jeff’s face light up. “I did too! Then I dreamed you were my husband, even still after I woke up. So I started trying to find you. Is that what you dreamed too?”

“Basically, yeah.”

“Shaun said you’d called asking about me. He was so excited! He wants to know when the wedding is.”

“I bet he does. He’s probably told everyone in town by now. He’ll have us on the front page of the *Post* if he can. ‘DREAM LOVERS COME TRUE.’ Jeff’s face showed puzzlement. “Because let me ask you, didn’t you – Right away, you said, you started looking for me. Didn’t you have any doubts at all?”

“Are you kidding?? I’ve been bouncing off the walls all day, wondering ‘Is this *real*??’ “

“Because I’ve got doubts up to *here*.” Chuck raised his hand high over his head. “*Is this real? Are we supposed to fall in love or something? If so, why? Who says? What caused it?*”

“I thought we did. What’s the matter?”

“What if this was just a really intense dream? Because the last thing I want to do is try to force a fantasy lover onto a real person. It won’t work. The real person’ll never stand for it: they’d say ‘Fuck you!’ and walk. And even if we did get together I’d never completely trust it. I’d always be wondering if it was some weird magic worked on us, and what’ll happen if the magic stops?”

“That’s exactly why I started looking for you,” Jeff insisted. “I had to find out if you were like my dream. And you *are*.”

“Irritable, stubborn, grouchy and prone to depression?”

“Yes. *And* smart, funny, cute, quick – “

“Flatterer.”

“Self-putter-downer. Don’t tell me you don’t find this just even a little exciting. I know you do, the way you smiled in the restaurant.”

“Are you gonna tell me you’re not the least bit weirded out?”

“My god, I’ve *been* telling you. Didn’t you hear me say I was bouncing off the walls?”

“I’m hearing ‘Tra-la, tra-la, I’ve been made to fall in love with a total stranger I’ve never met, and it’s all good.’”

Jeff took his arm again. “I’m not in love with you yet.” He wasn’t sure that was true; but felt like needling Chuck a little. He didn’t know why. He thought maybe it was that crack about ‘a hobby of feeling sorry for myself’. Chuck looked surprised. “Yes I was in my dream; but I had to find out for real,” Jeff went on. “No I wasn’t going to just run away with you or whatever, because of a dream. What if you were a stalker or something?”

“Or what if I hadn’t had the same dream?” Chuck replied. “That’s what I was afraid of. I have this dream, a really intense dream – *really* intense; it was like I’d finally found what I’d been looking for – that I was supposed to be with someone; namely, you. Then I wake up, and I’m alone, as usual; but still feeling that I’m supposed to be with you. But you aren’t there. But I’m supposed to be with you. Round and round like that. Yes, I was looking for you too. But what if you didn’t exist; or hadn’t had the same dream? You *would* think I was nuts, or a stalker. But I still had that – I don’t want to say ‘certainty’, but that’s what it feels like. So all day it’s felt like I was being jerked around by...by whoever or whatever had “granted” – quote unquote – my wish. And being jerked around makes me really mean.”

“I won’t ever, then; except up here,” Jeff smiled, patting the massage table. “But so we’ve both had this dream. Okay. Now we’ve met in real life, so we can go from here....Do you still want the massage?”

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“Can you change tires?” Jeff asked as he set to work.

Chuck raised an eyebrow. “Do you have a flat?”

“I don’t even have a car. But if I did, could you change one?”

“Sure.”

Jeff was skilled at his profession. His strong hands kneaded rhythmically. The oils were warm. The stereo, barely audible, played oldies. “*Now you’re back in my arms again; Right by my side....*” Chuck drifted into sleep.

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He is walking up an avenue. Jeff is with him, looking tousled and a bit abashed. “Man, I was really tired!” he says. “Soon as I finished I sat down, and fell right to sleep. You must’ve been tired too – you zonked out almost as soon as I started. You’re still snoring.”

“I’m still asleep?” Chuck inquires.

“Snoring away, bare-ass naked on my massage table. You look really cute.”

They are in the lobby of an office tower. Behind the desk Cerberus is on duty, a security guard’s cap on each of his three doggy heads. Out the corner of his eye Chuck sees a portrait of “Our Founder and CEO.” He turns for a full look but sees only a mirror, reflecting their faces. The label still reads “Our CEO.” He has an idea. “Have you ever heard of ‘lucid dreams?’ “ he asks Jeff.

“Sure. Where you know you’re dreaming, and can even make things happen.”

“Because I think we’re in one.”

Jeff is fascinated. “No shit.”

“So let’s see if we can find out what the hell’s up with this wish business.”

“Where do we start?” Jeff asks.

“At the top, of course.”

As they rise they glimpse other departments at work. The Seven Dwarves toil happily in the mail room. Bacchus jiggles a cocktail shaker in the cafeteria. In Accounting, Smaug the dragon reads *Forbes*; in Public Relations, the Dream Weaver works at her loom. Reaching the

penthouse, they see before them Mercury-messenger-of-the-gods. The silver wings on his helmet and heels flutter in agitation. “Look, it’s the florist guy!” Jeff exclaims. Chuck stifles a laugh. Mercury glares.

They are in a conference room, with carpet the color of a wine-dark sea, drapes the hue of rosy-fingered dawn. A stately clock reads “12:12:12” above the fairy motto “It Is Later Than You Think.” A terrace outside is set about with kalpataru trees in pots. There are the deities and entities themselves; and just as Chuck has suspected, they’re playing games with his mind, on some kind of Fifties-esque jukebox device. Amid gleaming chrome and neon, little holograms of himself and Jeff move jerkily through East Village streets, to an oldies soundtrack.

“Game over,” Chuck announces.

Quick as lightning Cupid seizes his bow, and plants an arrow in each man’s breast. They feel no pain – far from it. Instead there is moonlight, and violins, and starry eyes (green and brown); rainbows undulating like happy ribbons, larks and nightingales singing....”Can you say ‘cliché?’ ” Chuck remarks to Jeff, pulling out the arrows. “Nice try, Geronimo; but no sale.” Behind him the jukebox plays “*Stupid Cupid, stop pickin’ on me....*” The visions fade and change: Shaun scattering flowers; followed by a woman in superhero tights and red cape, carrying a coffeepot. (Jeff stifles a laugh.) Chuck meanwhile, arms folded, faces the d’s and e’s. “What the hell is the big idea?” he demands.

Trickster explains in polished phrases: the course of true love runs not smooth; what fools these mortals be. Yet he cannot help smirking at his own cleverness, like Wile E. Coyote condescending to Bugs Bunny. Jeff notes the dangerous look in Chuck’s eyes, and surmises that Chuck doesn’t take kindly to condescension. He is correct. Chuck concentrates a moment; and boom! – a cartoon boulder squashes Trickster, laying him out flat as a Valentine’s Day card. “*The man who shot Liberty Valance....*,” sings the jukebox.

Now the dark advocate turns his stern moral glare upon them --

“Who’s *that* guy?” Jeff asks.

“I don’t know,” Chuck replies. “The others I recognize: Venus, Cupid, Trickster Coyote, the Fairy Godmother --“

“Who looks like Shaun in drag.”

“- who does look like Shaun in drag. But this guy...he’s got a Puritan-type hat, and a Puritan haircut, and a mean Puritan ‘Thou Shalt Not’ tight-assed expression; kinda like Cotton Mather –“

“Cotton *Mather*? That sounds like a laundry detergent.”

Chuck laughs again. “It does, doesn’t it. Let’s call him Sudso.”

The dark one grows even darker at this disrespect. How dare mere mortals challenge the gods? Withdraw at once, or face revelation of your worst shames! He hints examples: the teen trauma of secret desires for other boys; the guilt and shame and gross sodden kleenex of masturbation; sordid trickings in car back seats and bar bathrooms....Jeff is disgusted, and pissed off. “Stop!”

“- *in the name of love; Before you break my heart,*” the jukebox sings. Chuck looks at it in perplexity and some annoyance.

Jeff leans on table, looking ‘Sudso’ square in the face. “Yeah, we beat off as kids. Yeah, we’ve fucked around with other guys before. So what? We’re normal healthy gay guys. Get *over* it.”

“Boys will be boys,” Chuck adds. “*Nothing you can say could ever take me away from my guy,...*” the jukebox sings.

“Exactly. Know what? Whoever this guy is, I don’t like him. I’m gonna try something.” Jeff concentrates. A great big washing machine appears, and gobbles up the dark figure. It washes him, rinses him, spins him, and for good measure fluff-dries him. He emerges as a large, annoyed cloud of lint, floating ineffectually about. Chuck is much impressed. “Excellent work. A man after my own heart.”

“*My boyfriend’s back, and there’s gonna be trouble,...*” the jukebox sings. “That’s enough outa you,” Chuck says, and yanks the plug.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everything has vanished. Venus stands before them. We were wrong, she says, to make sport with your wish. Would you like to rescind it?

In unison they start to say “No; but –“ They stop, look at one another, and laugh. “You tell it,” Jeff says, “you’re the practical one.”

“I am? That’s news to me. But this is a dream, and they’re not supposed to be practical. You go.”

“Okay. Well; we want to fall in love, sure; but not like this. Not with all this fairy-tale stuff confusing us.”

“No divine intervention,” Chuck adds.

“Right. We don’t need it. No offense or anything, but;...we’re grownups now, you know. We can manage.”

What is your wish? Cupid asks, all eagerness. Tell us your wish.

(“He wants to play Custer vs. Indians some more,”) Chuck asides to Jeff. “Our wish is, that when we fall in love we do so normally: by meeting someone and getting to know them.”

Venus has a shrewd twinkle in her eye. And do you wish to fall in love with one another? she inquires.

Both men pause. Both are about to speak in unison again; both about to say “Yes.” But they catch one another’s eye, and Jeff winks. “We’ll decide that,” he replies.

So it shall be! Venus decrees. The Fairy Godmother waves her wand.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“I think we’re alone now; there doesn’t seem to be any one around,...*

*I think we’re alone now; the beating of our hearts is the only sound....”*

\* \* \* \* \*

The way they’ve always remembered it is, one day Chuck made a delivery at Jeff’s restaurant. Jeff noticed him wince and rub his shoulder as he set down the box; and engaged him in conversation about sore muscles, leading to an offer of a free trial massage. Jeff was always scouting for new clients, but also saw a pretext to know more of this broad-shouldered dark-haired gruff fellow. Chuck, living on a tight budget, was in no way averse to free offers; nor was he averse – in fact, was all in favor – of further contact with this handsome green-eyed blond.

The massage had gone well, so they’d had coffee afterwards. The coffee talk had gone even better, to where they decided to return to Chuck’s place. There the usual one thing had led to the usual another – “boys will be boys,” as Chuck says. The sex had gone still better, to where Jeff slept over; and they had awakened to look on one another with interested surmise.

While dressing they discussed a dream they both seemed to have had. They both recalled the same scene: a jukebox playing oldies about them falling in love, and Cupid shooting arrows at them. They’d unplugged the jukebox and pulled out the arrows, saying “Thanks, but we’ll do it ourselves.” Shaun had then passed through, in drag as a Fairy Godmother, scattering flowers.

(Chuck also remembered Smaug the dragon reading *Forbes* and a boulder squashing Wile E. Coyote, while Jeff recalled a Puritan falling into a washing machine and Melissa as a coffee-pouring superhero.)

Did they live happily ever after? Well; the boon of “happily ever after” seems to be granted only in realms where “ever after” is an actual temporal measurement; the sort of realms where the clock always reads “12:12:12”. They are, however, still alive, and still together, and by all accounts, including their own, enjoying each other. In fact, they had a holy union a few years ago. At the reception the DJ played a lot of oldies: “Venus” by Frankie Avalon, “Mr. Sandman”, “Someday We’ll Be Together”, and “Dream Lover”, which they tried slow-dancing to. They didn’t get very far. They ended up swaying in each other’s arms, laughing. *“Because I want; Someone; To call; My own; I want a – Dream lover; so I won’t have to, Dream alone.”*