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Magic Carpet Ride

THE HARDEST PART'S getting it off the ground. I coax and cajole. I clench, scooch, and yank. Nothing. I can't understand it. The guy at Traders Village gave me the lowdown in discrete whispers: *One of a kind, won't last long, get it while you can.*

Larry Jones, my next-door neighbor who insists on mowing my lawn, hollers something over his riding John Deere.

I shake my head and point to my ears.

Instead of powering down that sonic menace, he cups his hands around his mouth and leans into the open window. Don't try so hard, you might strain something!

I fake a laugh and say, Real funny, Larry Jones!

He chuckles beneath his straw pith helmet as he shifts his mower into gear, beer gut jiggling with every bump.

But he's right in a sense: I am out of shape. I spend an hour in front of my closet mirror, examining myself in profile. The next day, I join Fitness Fanatic, hoping to shed some pounds. I don't go anywhere near my magic carpet for a week.

NOW I'M ELBOW DEEP in piles of junk on the front lawn. I organized, advertised, and began before dawn, when the first bargain-hunters roused me from my nightmares, beating my front door into submission. Forget about my fancy system, with the colored dots corresponding to prices listed on the supermarket poster board. Nobody offers more than ninety-five cents for anything, including my handstitched Indian moccasins and my authentic vintage lava lamp. My sign reads: EVERYTHING MUST GO! Like somebody said, maybe Jack Kerouac, *Living in the world but not forming attachments to the world is the Way of a true Zen student.*

Though Granny Agnes, who left me this place, is probably rolling over

in her grave, I put the house on the market, too. The realtor, Brynn Something, comes by and plants a sign in the yard bearing her toothy mug shot. After she drives off in her Beemer, several yard-sale scavengers inquire about the price. I point to Brynn's mug shot and say, Ask her.

In the early afternoon, my friend Lissa pays me a visit. She has long, tan legs and long, blonde hair, and everyone stares as she saunters among the junk piles. They'll rack their brains later, trying to figure out her super-model name. Truth is, she's wasting her potential at Zen Pie, same as me.

What are you up to? she asks.

I shield my eyes from the blinding spring sunshine. Someone just bought the sun hat right off my head for seventeen cents. Lightening my load, I say.

What for?

To increase the chances of a successful takeoff.

You bought a plane? says Lissa, craning her neck.

Not exactly.

Helicopter?

Before I can deny it, this greasy guy in a *Drink till she's cute!* cap exhales a cloud of smoke and says, How much you asking?

What're you after?

The chopper.

No, I—

You didn't even tell me you had one! says Lissa. Can we go for a ride?

Your sign says—

I'm aware of what the sign says. I made that sign. With a 99¢ poster board and the very magic markers that old lady with the chihuahua bought for a nickel.

You got gypped, he says, dragging on his smoke.

I fold my arms and say, Lemme know when you find something to buy.

We escape to the shade and the card table upon which rests my cash box. Lissa rolls a joint, and we smoke it.

I sell my oven mitt for a dime.

I sell my couch for a quarter.

I sell my bedroom suite for sixty-seven cents.

A little eight year-old girl tries to buy my *Too pretty for jail* t-shirt with the rainbow and unicorn, a long-ago birthday gift from Lissa, who snatches it out of the girl's hands and buys it back from me for twenty bucks. It's more money than I've made all day.

So, says Lissa, a rocketship?

What? No.

Hang glider?

Nope.

Kite board?

Uh-uh.

You gonna keep me guessing all day?

Two words, I whisper into her ear. Magic. Carpet.

You're joking!

Wanna bet?

Though his St. Augustine looks immaculate, Larry Jones fires up his John Deere in the driveway, then grins into his tallboy as he rides back and forth across his small patch of paradise. When he's within easy earshot, he brakes, idles, and says, Working hard or hardly working?

You're a funny guy, Larry Jones!

When we step out of the shadows, I spot some teenagers walking off with my vinyl LPs, an elderly man absconding with a stack of sci-fi paperbacks, and a pregnant woman raking clothes into an empty baby stroller.

Good riddance, I say.

You're crazy, says Lissa.

I'm on my way now!

LATER, ONCE THE HARD-HAGGLING scavengers have cleaned me out, I show Lissa my magic carpet. It's a sight to see, especially since there's not a stick of furniture left in the house.

She stares down at it as if something smells rotten. This old thing?

What do you expect? It's been locked up in a musty trunk for a hundred years.

Hope you didn't pay much.

You know what they say: *If you want to travel the Way of Buddhas, expect nothing, seek nothing, and grasp nothing.*

Henry James?

William, I think. Now I swell with pride. You're looking at my ticket outta this dump.

Thought that's what college was for?

Talk about a snow job!

We laugh.

Then Lissa says, *The more we know of particular things, the more we*

know of God.

Kierkegaard? I say.

Kant, I think, she says.

Kant never could, I say.

Lissa chuckles.

After a while, we ponder smoking some more weed, but ultimately decide against it, eating Rocky Road straight from the tub and taking turns riding on my magic carpet. It still won't budge.

A SPRING STORM crashes through the next day. Thunder booms and rolls. Lightning strobos. When I drag myself to the window, I squint against the gray, stormy glare. Larry Jones rides his John Deere back and forth across his lawn, sipping from a tallboy beneath his straw pith helmet.

I settle back onto my magic carpet. The sky opens up, rain pounding on the roof like a thousand hammers. Thunder rattles the windowpanes. The lights flicker. I take a big toke, and my mind tingles and surges. The deluge slackens for a moment, then, two minutes later, grows even more intense. And through it all, the clanging splutter of Larry Jones' riding lawnmower.

The rain lets up again. But now thunder crashes so close, the whole house shakes. A sizzle and zap, followed by a loud grunt. I hold my breath and cock an ear. Something's off. I listen some more. That lawnmower sounds different, the engine whining over a low, bogged moan. I heave myself up off the scuffed hardwoods and stumble to the door.

I squint but can't see much. Then I spot Kelly green punching through the gray curtain of rain. The mower's ramming the trunk of an old oak tree, with Larry Jones still attached, right foot wedged beneath the pedals, body dragging in the St. Augustine. I scramble over and hit the kill switch. Something smells like roasting meat. Black soot covers Larry Jones' grimace. I have an inkling about what needs to be done, but I don't get very far. I'm no good in emergencies. I bend to rescue his pith helmet from the wet grass.

Then a hysterical woman I've never seen, maybe his daughter, comes flailing out the front door, shrieking into the thrumming rain. I don't understand a single word. She slaps me hard across the cheek. She points and screams. She pulls out her phone and dials 911. An ambulance arrives in what feels like seconds, and EMTs load Larry Jones onto a stretcher and cart him away, sirens wailing.

SOMEWHERE IN THERE, I realize I'm late for my potential-wasting shift at

Zen Pie. Lissa gives me a lift, since I sold my rusty VW for eighty-five cents, and on the way I tell her about what happened. When we stroll in, our boss James is in the weeds.

It's about time! he shouts, throwing dough and slopping sauce, spreading toppings and working the giant oven, pouring pitchers and running the register, all at the same time.

Like an octopus, says Lissa.

You better have a good explanation, says James.

Sorry, I say, tying on an apron.

Her neighbor got struck by lightning, says Lissa.

You're lucky I don't fire you both!

I scoop ice into a plastic pitcher and fill it with Coke. Go ahead, James. Be my guest. You'd be doing me a favor.

His face falls. Don't say that, he says.

The truth hurts, I say.

Did I mention that James has the hots for me? You'd think he'd be after Lissa, but everybody knows she's way out of his league, even James.

He's a creeper, says Lissa later.

We're on a smoke break. The weed is so strong, I feel like I'm floating.

I wish I'd never met him, I say.

But what about your career?

We laugh till it hurts.

When we wander back inside, James sniffs at us as we pass and flies into a conniption fit.

Why're you in such a huff? Lissa asks.

You could be arrested! They could shut me down!

I nudge Lissa.

The place has cleared out. We untie our aprons and toss them onto the counter. I grab a four-cheese calzone, while Lissa takes a garden salad and wedge of focaccia. We blow James a kiss, then without even clocking out, we list across the barren parking lot.

LISSA DROPS ME OFF. Before I get out of my seatbelt, she says, *Satori is just like ordinary, everyday experience, except about two inches off the ground.*

Confucius? I say.

Nope.

Oh, right, what's his name again? Chuang-tzu?

Wrong again!

Then who was it?

Lissa's about to enlighten me, but she cuts herself off. Her face blooms into a shiny grin. Tell you the truth, I can't really remember right now.

The empty house seems weird at night. I gobble my dinner, take a hot shower, then smoke a bowl from my stash. Maybe that weightless feeling will assist with the flying situation. I smoke and wait, smoke and wait, my mind growing fuzzy. But nothing happens, not even the slightest shimmy or shudder. I lift the rug off the floor, stretch it out as best I can, and pretend it's sailing through the air. Then I lay it back on the hardwoods, sit down, and wait. Still nothing. I begin to wonder if I've purchased faulty merchandise. Or maybe it's the calzone? I make a hazy mental note to follow the diet I'm already supposed to be on, then pass out on my rug.

AT FIRST, I THINK I'M DREAMING. Larry Jones looks different than in real life, rounder and plumper, especially in the beer gut region. He's lost his pith helmet for good, and his head's completely bald. He sports gold hoops in his ears. His getup's odd, too: billowy pants, brocade vest with no shirt, one of those thin, pointy beards.

That's quite a fashion statement!

Is it your wish I should make a change of vestments? he asks.

You sound different.

He ignores me, floating around the room, wispy and weirdly translucent in the morning sunlight.

Shouldn't you be relishing the splendors of the afterlife?

Larry Jones goes pensive for a moment, then says, Things aren't quite as straightforward as we've been led to believe.

I lay back down on my magic carpet and close my eyes again. A trash truck clangs down the street. When I open them, Larry Jones is still there, wispy and hovering.

Sorry I couldn't lend you a hand, I say. I feel pretty bad about that, especially considering your new, uh, *condition*. But why're you here, Larry Jones?

You wish I should find the nearest egress?

There you go again.

Hot coffee might shake me from this stupor, but I sold my Bialetti moka pot for forty-three cents.

Tell me something, Larry Jones.

He sinks to the ground, bows, and says, Your wish, Master, is my

command.

Now that's more like it!

Just plain Larry's fine, by the way.

Duly noted, Larry Jones. So are you gonna fill me in?

He opens one eye and looks up at me. What're the odds, right?

You were struck by lightning and killed, and now you're a—Laughing Buddha?

Well—

Genie?

I'm not—

Laughing genie?

I wait. He stares at the floor.

Who's perhaps less jovial than he should be?

He forces a smile and fiddles with a string of wooden beads. Think it's pronounced *djinn*, he says.

Never touch the stuff, I say, but I've got some pretty good Purple Kush. I pack us a bowl, spark up, and take a hit. When I pass it to Larry Jones, he shakes his head and looks dour.

Now storm clouds roll in, and the light goes dim. Lightning flashes. When thunder rattles the windowpanes, Larry Jones flinches.

So? I say. Explanation?

All I know's you get three wishes. Larry Jones gives me a disapproving stare. But you know what they say, right?

What's that?

Be careful what you wish for.

You've got a million of them! I say, fake-laughing.

Think about it, he says. Then there's a pop and whoosh, and just like that, Larry Jones is gone.

THE CREAKY FRONT-DOOR HINGES rouse me. I sit up and blink just as Brynn What's-Her-Name waltzes in, all smiles and big hair, with a married couple who can't be more than a year or two older than me. They're wearing expensive, well-fitting clothes. Their cheeks have a healthy glow. The woman cradles a baby bump. Soon as she spots me, along with my pipe and stash, Brynn's smile darkens.

Marie, hi, we didn't realize you'd be here.

I rub my face, then tuck my hair behind my ears. Why would I be? I say. It's only my house.

The buyers stiffen.

But we spoke about this, says Brynn.

I spark a bowl I packed the night before and take a hit. *One who knows does not speak*, I say. *One who speaks does not know*. I can't remember if that's Einstein or Bertrand Russell.

I'm so sorry, Brynn explains to the couple.

I ignore their glares. She ushers them out the door.

Not five minutes later, I'm higher than I've been in a long time. Which is saying something. I laugh at everything and nothing. Springtime wind rustles through the budding trees. I sense that my magic carpet wants to fly. Then comes a wet whoosh, followed by a loud pop. When I look up, Larry Jones hovers in the air, still sporting that goofy outfit, beer gut bulging.

Thought you wanted to sell the house?

Though I cover my mouth, more laughter spills out of me.

Larry Jones floats back and forth across the empty room. Lighten your load? he says. Fly away on your flea-market rug?

It's the real deal, Larry Jones. A hundred percent authentic. He gives me a puckered, doubtful look. Which, I might add, is more than I can say for you.

Skeptical, huh? Maybe you'd like a display of my bona fides?

I nod, eyeing my depleted stash.

Do you like cars? He mumbles some incantation under his breath and snaps his fingers, and a beautiful red convertible with a little stallion logo appears in my living room. Before I can say a word, Larry Jones snaps again, and the car's gone.

Or priceless jewelry? He mumbles, snaps, and I feel a weight around my neck. I glance down at the biggest diamonds I've ever laid eyes on. He snaps again: gone.

Soon he's snapping like crazy, conjuring ponies, Louis Vuitton purses, hunky strippers, Jimmy Choo slip-ons, beagle puppies, Les Paul guitars, fine china, you name it.

Okay, I say, enough, I believe you, Larry Jones!

He glances at me. Kittens in a basket mew. I reach for one, but before I feel that soft warm fur, he snaps again, and they vanish.

So? he says.

I sit cross-legged on my magic carpet.

What'll it be, Marie? Fame, fortune, a good-looking husband to take care of you and your yard, so I won't have to?

I don't hesitate: I want my magic carpet to fly me away from here.

Larry Jones goes quiet for a moment. Tell you what, he says. Let's table that for the time being.

But you're supposed—

You need to give it some thought, he says. This is a one-time only type deal.

A mockingbird warbles from the eaves.

And it's good to have a home base, he continues. Your granny Agnes tells me she left this place to you free and clear. She'd be disappointed if you didn't hold onto it.

You spoke to her?

He nods, then goes wispy and drifts across the room, gazing around. And if you're keeping the house, you'll want your stuff back, right?

I guess, but—

Larry Jones snaps. The house refills with my cruddy furniture and knickknacks. A skinny teenager in boxer shorts is about to put my Step-pewolf album on the turntable. Not you, says Larry Jones, snapping again, sending him back where he came from.

Impressive, I say, though I'm not sure I mean it. All this junk feels like an anchor dragging me to the bottom of a lake.

Larry Jones looks pleased with himself. I imagine, though, he'd rather be out riding his lawnmower, sipping a tallboy in the spring sunshine.

Since you're so powerful, here's what I want.

Name it, he says, grinning.

I want a self-replenishing stash.

He looks stumped. Like a mustache?

Good one, Larry Jones, I say without laughing. You're still a funny guy. I wait. He says nothing. No, my weed, I say. I want it to—

Oh, right, I get it, he says, shaking his head. Bottomless drugs.

You're one to talk, Mr. Tallboy.

He snaps. My stash fills. I pack a bowl and light up.

And, I say, I've still got two wishes to go.

Make that one, says Larry Jones, gesturing dramatically to the house filled with junk. Then, with a pop and a whoosh, he's gone.

I SPEND THE DAY smoking and meditating, wishing my house were still empty. What kind of genie forces wishes on you? But that's Larry Jones for you. When I first moved in and let the yard dry up, he offered to take care

of the landscaping. I told him not to worry about it, but he reseeded the lawn anyway. He even planted perennials in all the flower beds.

In the late afternoon, the phone rings off the hook for about an hour. But I'm more Zen focused than I am high, so I never even check to see who's calling. Though I register every floorboard creak and windowpane rattle, every freeze-tag shriek and car-horn blast, they all pass right through me, as if I'm a door onto a higher plane of consciousness. Something like that. My magic carpet feels as if it's about to float away. Or maybe that's just me.

Soon a swirl of tangerine, rose, and emerald light streams through the windows. The thumping at the door may only be my heartbeat. Next thing I know, Lissa's crouching next to me, shaking my shoulder.

Come on, roshi, she says.

I blink and blink again. I can almost focus.

It's time to go waste your potential! She gazes at me as I emerge from the Great Beyond. Then she says, *The wind doesn't move.*

I manage to make my mouth work. *The flag doesn't move.*

Then in unison: *It's the mind that moves!*

Gandhi, right? I say.

Or was it Mother Theresa?

Anyway, I say, showing off my bottomless stash, we've got all the Zen Pie we need right here.

Poor James, says Lissa.

We get blazed, and I tell Lissa about Larry Jones.

Your nosy neighbor?

That's the one.

This I've gotta see.

I have no idea how to summon a Buddha-genie, since there was never any lamp or Buddha belly to rub. So I opt for shouting: Larry Jones! Larry Jones?! Come show off your magic powers!

Nothing.

Little too much wacky weed? says Lissa. She grabs my stash, spilling it all over the hardwoods, though the bag never empties. Wait, what's going on?

That's what I've been telling you, I say. The genie.

Larry Jones?

I nod and grin. That was my first wish!

Now a whoosh and pop. Larry Jones rides in on a phantom John Deere mower that doesn't make a sound. He holds what looks like a tallboy. He

floats a couple inches above the floor. Second wish, he says. If you wanna get technical.

Then what was your first? asks Lissa.

Larry Jones gestures at all my junk.

Seriously? she says.

I shrug and say, His idea of funny.

An empty house is not a home, says Larry Jones.

Guess you won't be selling!

I roll my eyes. Don't remind me.

Outside, blossoms bloom, trees bud, grass grows greener.

So? asks Larry Jones, leaning back on his mower. Have you made your decision?

Damn straight. Same thing I've wanted all along.

Wealth? says Lissa. A beach house in Maui? A man?

You're worse than he is, I say.

Is that possible? she asks Larry Jones. A man, I mean?

Sky's the limit, he says, then sips from his tallboy.

Lissa squeezes my shoulder. Hear that? Go big, Marie. A good-looking, wealthy man with a beach house in Maui.

Smart man, rich man, rugged man, Larry Jones says. Each time he snaps, a different man appears.

Incredible! says Lissa.

You better believe it, he says.

Not a chance, I say.

Disappointment darkens Larry Jones' face. You're still stuck on that dumb rug?

What? says Lissa. No! She definitely wants a man. Rich, smart, and sexy with international real estate holdings.

Look, friends, I say, I appreciate your concern. Really. But whose wish is this, anyway?

Silence.

Then let's get this show on the road!

Larry Jones frowns and says, Your wish, Master, is my command.

That's music to my ears, I say. Then to Lissa: Aren't you coming?

This is your thing, Marie. I'll be here when you get home.

Your loss, I say.

Where will you go?

Who knows?! To see the world. I'll send you postcards.

RED ROCK REVIEW

Now Lissa says, *This very earth is the Lotus Land of purity.*
And this very body, I reply, the Body of Buddha.

Emerson? she says.

Or Thoreau?

Lissa leans over and gives me a hug. I'll miss you, Marie.

Same here.

She tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear, smirks, then says, And so will James!

Ha ha ha. I shake my head. Now you can be the object of his sticky obsessions.

Not likely, she says. He only has eyes for you!

Ugh, don't even say that.

Larry Jones clears his throat. Ready? he asks.

I clutch the sides of my magic carpet. I was born ready!

Lissa takes two steps back. Bon voyage! she says and blows a kiss.

I wipe my palms on my jeans, take a deep breath, and close my eyes.

Just relax and enjoy the ride, he says, then snaps.

All at once, I feel a floating sensation and the wind in my hair. The exotic sunshine warms my skin. The scent of fresh-picked oranges wafts up from a bustling market, where a street musician who may or may not be James plucks notes from an oud. Syncopated drumming resonates in my chest. From a minaret, a muezzin whose voice reminds me of Lissa intones the call to prayer.

When I'm ready, I blink my eyes open. I can't believe what I'm seeing: I'm still in my junky living room. Gypped by my own Buddha-genie! From the couch, though, Lissa gives me an elated, incredulous grin. And that's when I notice:

I'm floating two inches off the floor.