

## Smoke On the Water

Scratching the three-day old stubble on his face, Silas Miller munched on the sandwich made by his sister Anne while he stared at the mountain of recyclables in front of him. Plastic and glass were wedged together, crammed in see-through bags waiting to be sorted. Containers for seemingly every consumable liquid including soda, milk and orange juice stared with patience towards the outside world like bundles of steely eyed fish caught in nets. They had to be counted, then cashed in prior to being recycled. Packed neater beside the pile were dozens of beer and wine cases filled with their respective empties. At least these would be easier to mark.

As Silas imagined the bags were nets of fish, in his mind he was once again far away from shore exploring the oceans on his sea legs like his little brother Jorge. But these bags weren't fish, just clusters of stale containers that in the confines of the dimly lit non ventilated warehouse smelled only a step below vomit. And he would never again have sea legs. Heck, he wouldn't even have legs that worked anymore, as he stared down at his atrophied limbs that only moved when you moved them. He snapped back to reality, wheeling himself around to more closely assess the pile hoping one day to go back to sea.

Silas grabbed his clipboard and wheeled himself over to the pile. He lit up the last of his darts, dangled it from his mouth, then grabbed the first of the blue bags to rip open for processing.

He was two hours into the pile by the time he got to a dark non recyclable bag that had the similar bumps of bottles to the other bags. He reached down for it and was surprised that it weighed about fifty pounds.

The wheelchair strained and lurched to one side as he stood the bag up to rip it open. His brow furrowed as he suspected some prick played a prank and weighed the bag down with wood. Or perhaps a dead animal intended for the dump accidentally ended up in this one.

There were both modern and very old bottles in the bag, even some jugs that looked like they came over when the Mayflower landed at Plymouth. Silas took them out of the bag and flung them to where they belonged not caring if they smashed. As he worked his way down the bag, he came upon a slender two-foot tall purple and gold object. At first glance he took it to be a lamp, and grabbed it preparing to heave it. This lamp was why the bag was so heavy.

He examined the unit more carefully.

It was, Silas decided upon further inspection, actually a bong of sorts. Even if not any of the multitude he was well versed in. Its eight-inch base, a deep rich purple, was bulbous and around the entire circumference was a crude three-inch tall sculpting of a throng of people from the waist up. They were bent backwards, their arms shielding their heads and bodies in fear from an unrepresented overhead menace. They reminded Silas of the images of slaves when he read about the pyramids in high school, years ago. Symbols which Silas took for possible language worked its way around the base in a single line.

The bong then tapered in as it went higher. A foot from the bottom, the purple turned to a gold as it both narrowed then widened three times before flaring out to a large ashtray and continuing on until it ended as a miniature bowl. On this stood a charcoal brick. What Silas initially thought was a thick power cord turned out to be a hose with a heavy golden mouthpiece on the end.

The bong was likely collateral obtained with other aged bottles as an old house was being gutted, or even the remnants of an estate sale. Not uncommon to Silas's experience as a sorter. It was eerie and gave him shivers and he almost threw it out right then and there. Yet there was something about the bong that he couldn't just bring himself to discard it. Plus, he told himself, there's always room for a good bong. Silas decided to do what anybody else in his situation would do- he set the bong to the side, finishing his work with the intentions of taking it home.

A mean fall North wind was blowing into his face as made his way to his apartment. It was a struggle making it up the hills he encountered on the three blocks going home. The church hill, the mellowest and generally most leeward block of the ocean side street, was an exception on this day and he wasn't sure he would even get by it without help. Few people took notice of the bong in his lap. Those that did mostly shook their heads, except for Alan, the long-haired bus driver that flashed him a big thumbs up as Silas rolled by.

By the time Silas finally got to his and Anne's apartment his arms were numb from working double time. He edged his wheelchair through the non- standard exterior door and wheeled through his kitchen. He ignored the dripping- faucet and pile of dirty dishes as he continued towards the living room. The flat stained carpet in here was so

worn his wheels felt no added friction upon entering it. If anything, the slanting floor which owed its current state to eighty years of frost on a rock foundation allowed him to speed up. He set the bong on his coffee table. He wanted to sleep but turned his mind to tackling the dishes and cleaning out the stove. Anne had been on his case lately about doing more around the place, and it was time to pull up his socks. Even if he had no use for shoes.

By seven o'clock that evening Matt Williams, one of his buddies, stopped in on his way home from the garage. They had been getting stoned together since junior high, and two or three or four nights a week Matt, among others, would still pop in to have a few puffs and smash a can of beer.

By the time Matt was there that night, Silas was already lit from marijuana he'd had while cleaning earlier.

Silas wasted no time in telling Matt about his new discovery, and his friend straightened his glasses as he looked it over.

"Jesus, man. This is a hookah. I can't believe how heavy it is. I think you see them in India or the middle east or somewhere. Wanna sell it? Twenty bucks," Matt offered.

"Is it just like a normal bong?" Silas wondered out loud.

"Something like that I think, but let's find out!" Matt exclaimed as he grinned at his buddy and started to take the unit apart.

They added water to the base, then sprinkled some shake into the small bowl that sat at the top. They covered this bowl with tinfoil and poked holes in it, then lit the accompanying charcoal brick with a lighter and blew on it until it sparkled then glowed orange. This went on top of the bowl. Being a gracious host, Silas looked at his friend and offered him the mouthpiece at the end of the hose.

In a terrible French accent, he added, "Mon monsieur, as owner of this parlor I would like to offer you zee very first draw of zee bong. Err, hookah."

Matt, while appreciating the opportunity, insisted that it was Silas's find and he should have the honor of the first of what would likely be many hits for the two of them.

"As you wish," Silas answered as he put the mouthpiece to his mouth and inhaled deeply. The water in the base gurgled as Silas took his pull and the hash's vapors worked their way down the pipe, through the water in the base, and into the hose. It took another draw for the smoke to reach his lips.

Matt watched Silas as he held his mouthful of smoke for a moment. He smiled, closed his eyes, and let his head roll back towards his shoulders. Moments later, his smiling face morphed into a crooked frown. Silas's face writhed while his eyelids flew open showing only the whites. He then straightened his head back up and looked at his pal without saying a word.

His eyes rotated and pupils came back, and Silas breathed out significantly more smoke than Matt thought he had breathed in. The smoke trailed from his lips in a stream towards the center of the room forming a large mass as it circled itself.

The last of the smoke left Silas's mouth, trailing with the rest, and his friend looked at him.

"Jesus," was all Silas could say as he stared into space.

"I'll take the next one!" Matt spoke as he took the hose from Silas's hand.

Before he put the mouthpiece to his lips Matt glanced at the plume of vapor across the room. It continued to swirl and spiral as it narrowed in width and stretched in height, ultimately darkening. It then began to dissipate, and to the astonished onlookers a man now stood where the smoke once was.

He was five and a half feet tall, six feet if one were to count the off-white and golden diamond patterned wrapped fabric he wore on his head. At the center of the head dress was a large green gem that seemed to capture the light in the room longer than it reflected back. The man himself was dark, with even darker eyes, which were accented with a small trimmed mustache and trimmed beard that ran along his jaw line. From his neck down a long-sleeved robe with matching fabric to his headdress extended to his feet, which were covered in sandals. On the chest and cuffs of the fabric a dizzying pattern of black lace wove around itself in a spiral pattern.

The man looked around him, slowly taking in the room as if it were the first time his had ever been indoors. He clasped his hands in front of him.

Matt froze with the hose in his hand.

"Who the hell are YOU, man?" Silas asked. "How 'd you get by us? Anyways, you're in the wrong house and better hit the road before I call the cops."

Matt was already standing up. He was just over six feet tall and much larger than the man in front of him. "You heard him, dude. You gotta go. Now." Matt eyed the room for a makeshift club in case things went south, deciding the hookah was his best bet if need be.

The man in the robe took in the two men in front of him with the same bewilderment that he had for his surroundings.

"You are speaking English," he stated. "Where am I?"

"Twin Oaks Loop, 'cuz," Silas answered. "Civic don't matter, as you won't be staying."

"Twin Oaks Loop," the man in the robe repeated Silas's and pointed to him. "My name is Gilgamesh Gharabaghi of the Kemel mountains. You are the man that released me from my prison," he added. "My reprieve allows that you and you alone shall be granted three wishes, or that you yield and give your turns to another, the final after which you yourself shall become shackled to the prison which binds me."

Silas looked at the man for a moment before he burst out laughing. "Get the Bejesus out of here. Seriously, dude, I'm betting you're a meth head or something from Salmon Brook Village and I'm calling the cops right now," he said as he picked the phone up from a crooked end table that had a quarter of its faux strip covering coming off.

"You do not wish for anything at all? I recommend you think about your decision," Gilgamesh Gharabaghi suggested as Silas dialed for the police.

“Well, you can make me a goat then!” Matt exclaimed with laughter as he thumbed towards himself. “What do you say, Silas? It needs your endorsement!”

Silas looked at Matt then nodded to the man in front of him as he kept dialing. “Yeah, sure man, make Matt here a goat.”

“Your wish is my honor to fulfill,” Gilgamesh answered as he nodded his head with a slight angle and made a sweeping gesture with his two hands that started at the hips and went in a wide arc ending with a clap in front of his heart.

“You really believe this, don’t you?” Matt asked Gilgamesh.

Silas turned to Matt to jokingly ask how it felt to be a goat but found himself at a loss for words when he realized that a goat now stood where Matt once was. The musky scent of its urine and sweat glands filled the room and it shrunk into a corner as it tried to look around at its surroundings.

The dispatcher came on the phone to ask Silas what the emergency was. Silas paused for a moment then stammered to her it was a misdial and set the phone back down on the stand.

Silas wheeled towards Gilgamesh to grab him. “What kind of trick is that?” he demanded. “Where did Matt go? He in on this too? That’s weird shit, man.”

Gilgamesh levitated a few feet which halted Bobby’s advance. “Your wish has been granted. For all intents and purposes, this now is your friend. Treat him well, but don’t milk him,” He added the last sentence with the tinge of a smile.

Silas didn't know what kind of trick this was supposed to be but suspected Matt and perhaps even another friend were in on it despite it looking like he had actually vanished right in front of his very eyes. Silas hated to play along, but he was afraid this goat was going to piss on his carpet, or worse. Anne would be wild. Silas caught enough flack for smoking up in the house as it was.

"You win. Switch Matt and the goat back," Silas asked, then put his two hands on the goat as he watched closely for the switcheroo to show how his friends were messing with him.

"Such a waste of wishes, your friend is right here in front of you and fine, all things considered," Gilgamesh Gharabaghi of the Kemel Mountains pointed out to him, "but as was before, your wish is my honor to fulfill," as he once again brought his hands to his hips, following a wide arc and clapping them in front of him.

Matt was once again in front of Silas, this time on his hands and knees, retching. Silas's hands were wrapped around his ripped and dirtied clothing as they had been with the goat. Which, by the way, was now nowhere to be seen.

Silas attempted to console his friend, patting his back. Matt jumped back from his touch, his face now pale and looking several years older. "What the hell did you just do to me?" he asked Gilgamesh. Then Matt looked at Silas. "You're a bastard. You know that?"

Silas tried to straighten out his thoughts to find words for his friend. "Man, I don't know what is going on, or if you are in on this somehow, but what the hell?"

"One wish left. Use it at your discretion," Gilgamesh informed Silas.

Silas still wasn't fully convinced this was even happening. He wondered if he was tripping out or perhaps even dreaming and couldn't wake up. His experiences in similar situations told him sometimes the best thing to do when he was in a state like this was to just play along and see where the plane landed. Eventually, all planes had to land.

"I have a question or two, but NOT a requested wish," he stated to Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh nodded with anticipation, his eyebrows raising.

"I have one wish left, can I wish for more wishes?"

"No. Why people always ask that, I do not know," Gilgamesh answered shaking his head. He spat on Silas's floor. "One would think you would be happy with the three wishes I offer."

"Can I take my time to decide? And don't spit on the floor, man."

"Until the next moon shows its first quarter, yes."

"And I can wish for anything?"

"As I have said, yes. Within my ability. Which reaches from sea to sea and earth to sky. Choose wisely. Or not. It is up to you, I am merely the vessel for your desires."

Silas looked at Matt. "I can't ask you to leave as it may be taken out of context by Mr. Gilgash or whatever his name is. So, I'll let you respectfully decide to decide to take off if you would. If this is a prank, you got me, I'm playing along."

Matt didn't need additional convincing as he grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. It would be the last time Silas would ever see him. He was leaving just as Anne was coming in, getting off from the hotel she worked at.

“Good luck,” Matt cautioned her in the doorway. “If I were you, I would go anywhere but here,” and with that he was gone into the night.

Anne walked into the living room to greet Silas, frowning at the bong on the coffee table. “Jesus, Silas. And what’s up with- oh, hi-“ she trailed off as she examined her robed exotic visitor. “I’m, uh, Anne.”

“Gilgamesh Gharabaghi of the Kemel mountains,” Gilgamesh responded as he stepped forward taking Anne’s hand. He stared down at her curly bangs, and long hair that half hid her freckles, taking her in. Gilgamesh bowed deeply, smelling her hand before kissing it. “It is most unfortunate you are not the keeper of my prison, as you are most beautiful. Forgive me, for my prison has kept me out of the company of such fine delicacies,” he added.

Anne looked at Silas for explanation but got nothing except for a set of eyes motioning her away.

“He’s going to be staying with us for a few days,” Silas informed her.

Anne looked again at her visitor. “Ummm, can we talk when you have a chance?” she asked as she headed back to the kitchen. She had talked to Silas before about his strays he let stay in the house.

“She’s off limits,” Silas warned Gilgamesh when it was again just the two of them.

Gilgamesh shrugged his shoulders. “Is that your final wish?” he asked with a grin.

“Eat shit.”

The next two weeks found Gilgamesh crashing on Silas's couch and becoming immersed in the ways and patterns that comprised Silas's life. They would have coffee for breakfast, then spend day at the recycling depot, secretly getting lit when there were no customers around. The customers and local community found Gilgamesh quite peculiar, but just presumed he was from Salmon Brook Village and didn't push the subject.

Silas only had one wish left which he pondered heavily. After all, if one had just one wish, what would it be- for him, the ability to walk again? Endless fortunes? Immortality? Everlasting health for those he cared for? He had one wish and had to choose wisely, trying hard to carefully select his words before he spoke.

Gilgamesh, on the other hand, could obtain for himself anything he desired. As such, they were never in want of greasy chicken, limitless cans of beer, and the best hashish the world had to offer. For a sixth term in eternity, Gilgamesh was having the time of his life.

"This is much life out here compared to my prison. I wish there was a way- any way- I could stay out here and experience life as you do," Gilgamesh stated one afternoon as they watched frogs from the edge of a pond while having a beer.

"I do too, my friend," Silas answered.

"Your wish is my honor to fulfill."

Silas watched in horror as Gilgamesh nodded his head on a slight angle, put his hands at his hips and arced them high and wide with a clap in front of him. Silas looked down at his hands as they, along with his arms dissolved into dust and drifted away into

the wind. He did not have time to speak as the rest of his body in its entirety soon followed leaving the wheelchair vacant. The prevailing winds promptly carried this dust back to the hookah and he would remain its new prisoner until somebody, be it an Arabian prince, bottle sorter, or anything in between, would allow him out and receive their own three wishes.

Gilgamesh Gharabaghi of the Kemel mountains sat in Silas's wheelchair and looked down at himself. His body was now that of Silas, and he turned his wheelchair and wheeled himself to his new home on Twin Oaks Drive to get rid of the hookah. He thought discarding it into the nearby sea may be a start.

He hoped Anne was home.