

Wish Fulfillment

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The play opens on the subway. A businessman—black—holds the top bar with one hand and reads a newspaper with the other. The sounds of the subway hum, lights whiz by, and his body is gently jostled by the ride. Suddenly the subway sounds melt away and the light becomes as bright as the sun. Instead of being on the subway, the MAN now exists on the African plains. But he takes no notice. As the sounds of his environment grow louder, he gives a quick glance up from his paper, then continues reading. With his other hand, he absentmindedly lets go of the bar, which no longer exists. He stops. He slowly lowers his paper and looks around in a slow panic. Very carefully, he folds his paper and tucks it away. A lion growls. The lights fade on the savanna and come up on a living room. A young, non-black man, DAVID, enters.

DAVID

Mom?!

DAVID anxiously scans the living room. He calls offstage.

Mom!

DAVID sees something on the table. He picks it up. It is an antique Arabian lamp.

Ohhh, I knew it....

MOM

Offstage:

David?

DAVID

Mom!

MOM enters.

MOM

David, what are you so worked up about?

DAVID

Where is he, Mom?

MOM

David, who—?

DAVID

Holds up the lamp:

Him, Mom. I know what he did—

MOM

Oh, David.

DAVID

—What you told him to do.

Beat.

I love you, Mom. You know that.

MOM

Sitting him down:

I do, David.

DAVID

You used one of your wishes.

MOM

I did, David. I did.

DAVID

Oh God, Mom; why? What you did—I never knew you to be such a bigot.

MOM

Oh, David; I'm not.

DAVID

I got to work this morning, Mom, and my boss wasn't there. Neither were James, Sherry, or the guy at the newspaper stand. And then I tried calling Roger and he's not answering.

MOM

Roger?

DAVID

Yes, Mom.

MOM

Your Roger?

DAVID

Yes.

MOM

I had forgotten you said he was black.

DAVID

I didn't say it, Mom; you've met him.

MOM

I guess I got him confused....

DAVID

All of the black people I know have gone missing. Disappeared into thin air.

MOM

Oh, not thin air, David.

DAVID

Then where?

MOM

Africa.

DAVID

Africa?!

MOM

Where else should you find black people?

DAVID stands, furious. In frustration, he rubs the lamp hard.

David?

DAVID

Where is he?!

MOM

Oh, David.

DAVID

Hey, Genie! You here me? Get out here!

MOM

David, stop yelling. The neighbors will hear.

DAVID

No they won't, Mom. The neighbors won't hear. Because the neighbors are black. And you wished them away to Africa.

DAVID spies a ceramic teapot. He picks it up and rubs.

Are you in there?!

MOM

David, please!

DAVID

You can't hide forever!

The GENIE enters—not from the teapot, but from the front door. He is dressed in full Arabian splendor and carries a small black box with dangling wires.

GENIE

David!

DAVID

You.

GENIE

Isn't today a work day?

MOM

Oh, thank God you're back. You need to explain to my son—

GENIE

Oh, I will; don't you worry. But first....

He presents the box to Mom.

For you.

MOM

A car stereo?

GENIE

Nothing but the best for my mistress.

MOM

Oh, you're too sweet.

DAVID

Where did you get that?

GENIE

Oh. It's something from the Johnsons next door.

DAVID

The Johnsons aren't here.

GENIE

Well, David, naturally. So they don't have any use for it.

DAVID

Jesus Christ, Mom....

MOM

David....

DAVID

Mom, you're looting!

GENIE

I know; it's a real role reversal, huh?

DAVID

Jesus Christ, the two of you! You think the Johnsons would ever do this to you? Mom, you went to Vegas and they fed your cat.

GENIE

David, this is different. We've got the drop on them this time.

DAVID

To Mom:

You give that back. Before you say anything else or wish anything else. I want you to give it back.

MOM

Sighs:

You're right.

She puts the stereo on the table and looks at the GENIE.

You'll have to put it back.

The GENIE looks at them, looks down at the stereo, and frowns. Self-consciously, he twists off one of his rings and places it on top of the stereo. DAVID shakes his head. The GENIE stares at him.

GENIE

You know, someone else is going to come along and take this stuff anyway.

DAVID

Well whose fault is that?

MOM

Oh, David; let me explain.

DAVID

Good. I need an explanation.

MOM

Now, you know I'm not a drastic person, David. You know that. How long have I had the Genie?

DAVID

Too long.

MOM

Years. And I've never asked him for a thing.

GENIE

Only the pleasure of my company.

MOM

I'm not selfish. I knew that whatever I was going to wish for, I wanted it to be beneficial. Something for everyone.

DAVID

And that's what you think this is?

MOM

I do, David; honestly. I know we don't agree on everything. But I do my best. And I did what I did trying to find a way to make things better. For everybody.

DAVID

Everybody but black people.

MOM

No, David; them, too! I mean them, too. But David, you read about some neighborhoods, and the violence, and you think about it. Some people—the Johnsons—they're fine. But others, David, they just aren't cut out for it. It's 150 years later and they just aren't cut out. Do you see what I mean?

GENIE

Mistress you don't need to say another word. I think it's time for wish number two. Time to turn the Blue Fairy over here into a real boy.

MOM

You leave my son alone.

DAVID

But it's true, isn't it? You've said that before, almost even wished it. When I told you about Roger. I've never heard you say that all black people should be sent to Africa. But time and time again I've heard you say how wonderful it would be if everyone was straight. Your son especially.

MOM

David, you've said it yourself that you don't have it easy.

DAVID

I don't care about what I have easy, Mom. I know this isn't the whole story. I know something must have happened to set you off like this.

GENIE

Something did.

MOM

Oh, but David, you wouldn't think it's—

GENIE

No, tell him.

MOM

This morning, the Genie and I were in the kitchen. Your aunt's community group is having a bake sale, so he was helping me make a pie. The Genie's an excellent cook.

GENIE

Gesturing in reverence:

I've learned from the best.

MOM

Oh, thank you. Anyway, I place the pie on the windowsill to cool, and after I start the dishwasher I see it's gone. I go to the window and look out and see the Morgans' kid running away. I got so mad; this was for charity. I was so angry. I start to yell after him, but I stop. And under my breath, I say, "I wish they would all go back to Africa."

GENIE

Now I was there.

MOM

He was there.

GENIE

I heard her, so I whispered to her. "Do you mean that?"

MOM

I said, "yes."

DAVID

That's it. Black America condemned over a pie. The biggest forced exodus since the Trail of Tears and it's because of a crime out of Huckleberry Finn?

MOM

Well David, you know I wanted that book banned.

DAVID

Jesus, Mom. You have to undo this. You have to wish them all back.

MOM

David, I know that feeling. I've felt it, too. But I want to see how it will work out first. If it turns out that there's a major panic, and Nigerians or whoever start to attack all of our blacks, and if things don't get any better here, then yes, of course I'll wish them all back.

DAVID

There's panic right now! It won't be long before—

MOM

Oh, David; it's an adjustment period. People need time. And if everything goes OK, then everybody in Africa should get along, and then we'll also be able to solve a lot of problems here. And so far I think it's going OK. I haven't noticed much of a difference.

DAVID

Maybe you can say that, but believe me, that's all wrong. There's been a big difference. My entire workplace has been turned upside down.

MOM

Honey, co-workers come and go all the time. You'll get new ones. And I'm sure eventually they'll be in touch. And you'll see, I really think so, that it will be so much easier. For them, for you....

A summary:

David, that story...it's not just the pie. I don't want you to think I'm angry or reactionary. I didn't do this out of hate. I only did what I thought was necessary.

DAVID

Scoffs:

White man's burden; I see.

GENIE

Can I say something?

DAVID

No.

GENIE

I think we're forgetting something. Haven't we forgotten about Roger?

DAVID

I haven't forgotten. I want him back.

GENIE

You want a lot of people back. I would think you'd want Roger a whole lot more.

DAVID

I'm trying to appeal to my mother's sense of decency.

GENIE

Decency! There's an interesting word.

To Mom:

My mistress, my dear; why don't you tell David some of the things you think about life with Roger?

MOM

Well, David, you know I don't approve. Of Roger, of a lot of the things you've decided about yourself. I wonder what happened to the boy I raised.

DAVID

Go on.

MOM

David, now is the time of my life when I'm starting to think about grandchildren.

DAVID

Grandchildren? Is that it? Mom, that's ridiculous! What about Paul?

MOM

Well, David, you know; your brother, he's got the—

GENIE

His boat don't float.

DAVID

So why turn to me? Why not just Genie up some blue pills for Paul and be done with it?

MOM

Well, David, it's bigger than that. There are a lot of mothers out there who have felt the same loss and disappointment that I have. That something went wrong. And now I can make that right again.

GENIE

Listen, kid. I've seen a lot of people, but your mother's a true altruist.

MOM

There's also Sophie.

DAVID

Sophie?

MOM

You met her at the Besson's house New Year's Eve. She really took a shine to you.

Another scoff from DAVID.

Oh, David. I just know the two of you would hit it off, if only you weren't so convinced that you had to be—

Beat.

Well, it doesn't matter.

She turns to the GENIE.

I'm going to do it.

DAVID

You're going to make everybody straight. For Sophie; for someone I don't even know.

MOM

David, under any circumstances but these she'd be good for you.

DAVID

I'm guessing she's not black, huh?

MOM

Oh, David, you have no idea what this world is really like, no idea at all! Sometimes it seems that optimism, the only reason you have it, is to watch it drain from you year after year. David, I've seen too many neighborhoods, too many families, all fall apart when it would have been so easy just to stay the way it was. And I can do something about it. I think I need to.

Beat.

I love you, David.

His back is to her. She attempts to embrace him. He does not move. On the verge of tears, MOM exits.

GENIE

Well, I'd better go after her. You know. Just to make sure she doesn't change her mind.

He pats DAVID on the back and exits. DAVID sits, exhausted. The lights fade on the living room as crowd noises fade in. Spotlight on the MAN, trying to get the attention of the crowd.

MAN

Ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen! Can everyone hear me?

The crowd quiets.

Now, I think we all know the situation we're in. This is the Serengeti. Many of you remember it as the setting for The Lion King. And the Serengeti Plains are a part of Africa, which you may remember was the name of an early 80s song by Toto.

A burst of crowd noise, which the MAN silences.

MAN (cont.)

Now, I bring this up, I bring this up because some of you insist that—however we got here, whatever the means—you insist that this was a blessing. That we have been called here. That some voice has whispered “Back to Africa.” Well, now what? We’re back to Africa. I haven’t heard any more whispering; I don’t remember any in the first place. You know, all my life, people have been saying, “We’ve forgotten the ‘African’ in ‘African-American.’” “We’ve forgotten the ‘African.’” Well, here’s the Africa. Genuine African dirt. African grass. And, if we walk far enough, probably African men in jeeps with rocket launchers. Barring any more divine intervention, I’ll take the “American” over the “African” any day.

More crowd noise.

I know some of you already have your minds made up. The mother country has embraced you and you embrace it back. So let me see hands. How many of you plan to stay?

He surveys the crowd.

Now, of those who wish to stay, how many were thinking about changing their names to Kunta Kinte?

A beat.

That’s a lot of Kunta Kintes. Ma’am, ma’am; Kunta Kinte is a man’s name. The name of the guy on Reading Rainbow. So I think we have to admit, all of us, that we have forgotten the “African” in “African-American.” And if there was ever a chance to remember it, I can’t think of a more appropriate opportunity than now. But know that by doing so, you run the risk of forgetting the “American.” Some of you may like that. “American” means your car gets pulled over for any reason—or no reason. But “American” also means you have a car. “American” means your Congressman lies to you; he just comes to visit you ‘round election time. As opposed to here, where you get visited by death squads. “American” means that the only positive black female role model you had growing up was Aunt Jemima. But “American” also means you had the pancakes to pour her on. Where are the pancakes, Africa? Where are the pancakes?

Beat.

MAN (cont.)

There aren't any pancakes in Africa. Not for us. We all have a life in America worth returning to. Worth fighting our way back from the middle of nowhere to get to. "Back to America." That's the voice I hear. Who else hears it?

Points to the crowd.

Do you? Do you, ma'am? You hear it. "Back to America." Does everybody hear it?

An affirmative from the crowd.

That's right! Once we start walking, once we get in cell phone range, we're going to start an airlift that makes the fall of Saigon look like a paper airplane contest. Let's gather our things and make like Moses. We're going to start out....

The MAN points in one direction, then looks back at the crowd.

Whoa. Where's everybody going? If we are where I think we are then— What's that? What did you hear? Oprah? Somebody says they've seen Oprah; so what? She's just as lost as you. Yeah, I know Oprah can get us a plane. So can Uncle Sam, and odds are better if we—

Crowd disapproval.

All right, all right; those of you that want to walk for miles in the wrong direction, trying to find Oprah, fine. I'll catch up. Goodbye.

Some of the crowd leaves.

The rest of us...everybody....

In fact, the entire crowd leaves.

Nobody.

The MAN is alone. He calls out:

You want Oprah; you're going to find tigers! Hungry tigers! I'm going to find airplanes....

Lights fade on the MAN and return to the living room. DAVID sits alone. The GENIE enters. HE looks at DAVID.

GENIE

Well, she's ready to wish.

He slaps a hand on DAVID's back.

Aw, cheer up, David. "Clitoris" is not a dirty word.

DAVID

So I'm going to be straight?

GENIE

Well, that's still one of the points up for contention. Your mother's trying to work out the differences between: "I wish all gays were straight." and "I wish all gays would not be gay." There are nuances there.

DAVID

So it's all down to the details.

GENIE

Maybe not even. Your mother's leaning pretty heavily towards the "not be gay" wish, but I told her it would be best to take a break beforehand.

DAVID

So she'll go into it with a clear head.

GENIE

Ya huh.

DAVID

How considerate.

GENIE

Oh, boo-hoo baby. I'll have you know I called that break for you.

DAVID

What for?

GENIE

I can't lie to you, David. You're a condemned man.

He eyes him.

I was going to offer a last request.

DAVID

Excuse me?

The GENIE strokes his cheek and backs away. He sits.

GENIE

Come on, baby. Groove with the Genie.

DAVID

No! I can't even believe—no! You rip my boyfriend a world away from me, threaten to all out neuter us, and now you want to offer some consolation prize? No, that's worse than disgusting.

GENIE

I can be disgusting, David, if that's what you're into. I can be exhilarating. I can be life-shattering. I can be anything you want me to be; I'm the wish man. I can make any and all of it happen, and by the time it's over I'll make you call me master.

DAVID

No.

GENIE

Oh, what's holding you back: Roger? There's no point in waiting for him. You think the government is going to get its act together? This is America;

GENIE (cont.)

you know how we deal with black people in crisis: we put 'em in a football stadium and lock the doors. You've got little time left if you want to taste the rainbow, and you're not going to get it from any place but the Genie.

DAVID

And I don't even have to wish for it.

GENIE

You want a wish, you ask your mother. This is gratis.

DAVID

Genie, maybe you have nothing better to do, but I really have more on my mind than playing open sesame.

GENIE

Don't flatter yourself, David; you aren't the only one with deep thoughts. You think it's easy moving all these people at your mother's request? I had questions of my own—plenty of questions. Do I send all black people to Africa, or just the Americans? Where, in Africa, do I put everybody? Where does Tiger Woods go? But I sorted it out. I had to. You know why?

DAVID

You're a Genie; of course you have to.

GENIE

David, David, David; when it's for your mother, I want to. Get to know her and she's a lovely person.

DAVID

Thank you, Genie, I do know my mother. And keep in mind that she'd see that other people can be just as lovely if she'd get to know them. Maybe if my mother spent more time—forget that—if she even glanced out the window at the Johnsons, maybe she would have had a slight change in her

DAVID (cont.)

opinion of black people. Maybe if she saw black people on television that weren't "artist renditions of eyewitness descriptions," she'd have seen something, something that might convince her.... But then, I don't know. She saw gay people. Gave birth to one. And she's going to wish them away, too.

He turns to the GENIE.

I understand that in your own narrow, self-interested way, you're trying to comfort me. But you're doing it without any attempt to understand me. At all. That's what you really do for Mom. The wishes aren't the main thing: you try and understand her. I try, too. But there's no way I can live in a world that works the way she thinks it does.

GENIE

That, David, is the Genie advantage. The world works however we make it.

MOM enters the room. Her eyes are red. The GENIE looks at her and stands.

And it's time to make it.

The GENIE walks to MOM. He motions for them to exit. MOM turns, but then walks back to DAVID. She holds him tightly, kisses his forehead, then releases him. She and the GENIE exit as the lights fade on the living room and a spotlight rises on the sights and sounds of Africa. The MAN stands, alone, fanning himself with his newspaper. A truck can be heard approaching. The MAN looks up. The truck brakes and a short burst of the National Geographic theme plays. The spotlight fades and lights return to the living room, some time later. DAVID sits on the couch, reading a "men's" magazine. He stares at a female model, puzzled. A beat. Frustrated, DAVID throws up his hand.

DAVID

They're fake.

DAVID shakes his head and continues reading. After a moment, the MAN enters.

MAN

Knock knock; it's Meryl Streep.

DAVID looks up, sees the MAN.

DAVID

Roger!

He takes ROGER into a deep, tender embrace. DAVID looks at him.

Meryl Streep?

Realizing it:

Oh.

DAVID AND ROGER

In unison:

Out of Africa.

DAVID

What's this...?

DAVID reaches to his back and takes a magazine out of ROGER's hands—another copy of the same men's magazine. DAVID gives him a look.

ROGER

I had to read something on the plane.

DAVID throws the magazine onto the couch.

DAVID

So you've figured it out. America wasn't the only thing taken away from you by my racist, homophobic mother.

ROGER

I like your mother.

DAVID

She likes you, too.

ROGER

But I have to admit, it's not much fun to get displaced, sunburned, and magically become a eunuch. You know the feeling.

DAVID

Not entirely.

ROGER

Yes you do. I've seen you sunburned.

DAVID

Roger, you're my hero.

ROGER

David....

DAVID

You're just taking this so awfully, awfully well.

ROGER

David, black people have suffered through worse and handled it with more dignity than I. Even this time I got off easy. I didn't even pay for my plane ticket. I came back with a National Geographic film crew.

DAVID

Wow.

ROGER

Now if people had asked Rosa Parks to get off the bus, and she said, "Sure, I'll just hitch a ride with those National Geographic guys," then you may have a point. But she didn't. I'm no hero.

DAVID

I can't believe that.

They embrace again. DAVID moves to kiss ROGER, but ROGER stops him.

ROGER

It'll be painful.

DAVID kisses him anyway. ROGER kisses him back, but it's the kiss of two puzzle pieces that don't fit together. They let each other go. DAVID looks at ROGER.

DAVID

You're right.

ROGER walks away from him and sits.

ROGER

Do you know who I really feel sorry for? Sassy black women. It isn't so much that they've been through the same ordeals as all other black folks, but when they come back to the US, what kind of a world can they come back to? David, any time you dragged me to a club, we'd hear the music. Grown men listening to music that neither of us like and both of us are too old for. And—I might be wrong—but it seems to me that every other vocalist in these songs was a sassy black woman. I found that interesting. Not every black woman is a sassy black woman. I know very few sassy black women myself. My mother is not a sassy black woman. My mother didn't speak until she was twelve. Yet these women—the sassy ones—have found a place in the American gay community. And now that community is gone.

He looks at DAVID.

ROGER (cont.)

I'm not too worried about gay men. Alienation, unfulfillment; we've all dealt with it before. But now, if we're eternally frigid, would any gay man willingly listen to that awful club music without the opportunity to bed another man? I don't think the answer is yes. And I think that leaves sassy black women without a place in the gay world. God save the sassy black women.

A beat. DAVID, almost to himself, does his impression of a sassy black woman.

DAVID

"Sassy black women...."

ROGER

In the same voice:

"Sassy black women."

DAVID

"You see baby, it's a little hot in here tonight."

ROGER

"In more ways than one!"

DAVID

"We're your Weather Girls, and have we got news for you."

ROGER

"I have one thing to say: Sashay, Shante."

They smile at each other and let out a light, shared laugh.

DAVID

Sashay, Shante.

ROGER

We can't be gay anymore. But I guess we can't be anything else, either.

DAVID nods. MOM enters. She is followed by the GENIE, who is lugging a large pot of gold behind him. He pushes the pot in front of MOM and stands behind her.

MOM

I've been doing some thinking, David. I'm willing to accept the possibility that I'm wrong. Maybe my wishes have made everything worse than before. I knew it was possible, and told myself that if I saw it happen I'd change it back. But now I'm worried. I'm worried things might get bad, truly bad, and I won't be able to see it happen. So I want you to have this.

DAVID

So if nothing else, I'll have financial security.

GENIE

It's a pot of gold, genius. It belongs to a leprechaun.

ROGER

You stole it from a leper colony.

GENIE

Look, David, this is a goodness-of-your-heart moment from your mother. She's doing something for you.

DAVID

Doing what?

MOM

Eventually the leprechaun is going to come back for that pot of gold. And when he does, he'll grant you some wishes to get it back. And you can do with those what you'd like.

DAVID

Flatly:

Is that how it works?

GENIE

It's what I've been told.

MOM

David, I'm a mother. Mothers wish the world for their children. I'm fighting with myself not to do it for you. But it's better to let you wish the world for yourself.

DAVID

And it's OK, Mom, even if my wishes might disagree with your own?

MOM

That makes it that much more important.

They embrace.

DAVID

Thanks for the pot of gold, Mom.

MOM

Thank the Genie.

DAVID

No.

GENIE

He doesn't have time, besides. We need to get to the butcher shop. I'm cooking tonight.

MOM

That's right. Are you staying, Roger?

ROGER

I've traveled this far.

MOM

We'll be right back.

DAVID

Bye, Mom. Thank you.

MOM and the GENIE exit. ROGER looks at the pot.

ROGER

I think I need a little bit explained for me. Is this a happy ending?

DAVID

I don't know.

ROGER

Nobody's gay. Millions of black people still aren't back to their homes. And we've got a big black cooking utensil. Is that happy?

DAVID

I don't know.

ROGER

What happens if this leprechaun never shows up?

DAVID

I don't know.

ROGER

And if he does, what happens if he doesn't grant wishes? What if he just shows up with a box of cereal and that's it?

DAVID

I don't know.

ROGER

And what happens to the sassy black women?

DAVID

I don't know.

Beat.

But they've got time to think about that on their way back.

ROGER nods.

ROGER

And what happens to you? Do you have a wish?

DAVID

Yeah, I've got a wish. With or without the leprechaun.

ROGER

Do wishes come true?

DAVID

Long pause.

I don't know.

The two sit in silence. The lights fade and the play ends.