

The Lamp

by James Lynn Smith

The forested path was dark with overgrowth. Branches brushed against Kate, clutching at her dress and scraping her legs. Soon night would fall. Stars and a crescent moon overhead would only give feeble illumination. There was a need to hurry so she could break into the open and see distant lights in the windows of Grandpa's house. It was five years since she had come this way, and the enchantment once felt had turned to fear. Unease crept upon her when recalling tales about a lone wolf lurking at night.

If only her old car had made it a little farther, Kate wouldn't have had to take the shortcut through these woods. Walking along the narrow road would have taken longer, and she had no inclination to hitchhike with strangers. In hindsight that seemed a safer option.

Grandpa lived alone since Grandma passed, and Kate rarely visited nowadays. The job at the department store and evening classes took a lot of time. Tears ached behind her eyes as she thought of his loneliness, but he had chosen to continue living far from town, willing to be a recluse. No other relative was within hours of driving distance from him.

Kate had answered the phone upon entering her apartment that afternoon. Grandpa's voice had an unusual fervor, asking her to come. He had something she must see, but it couldn't be explained over the phone. His call reminded her of childhood visits, when he first showed her the hen's nest containing eggs in the chicken coop and later an armadillo shell. His eyes were bright and his excited, breathy voice conveyed the thrill of discovery.

But Kate wasn't a child anymore. What could be so exciting now? Maybe Grandpa was losing it. *Sad that others in the family live too far—*

Loud screeching from the tree above alarmed her. An owl flapped its wings and flew away. In the distance a dog—or wolf—issue a plaintive howl. Her pulse quickened when an image of herself as a lifeless body, ravaged and abandoned, swept through her mind. *I've got to douse these thoughts.*

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After another half-hour, the trees cleared and Kate was walking through an unattended field. In the distance, lights were visible in the windows of Grandpa's house. Stopping to take a few breaths and regain her composure, she ventured onward.

Kate knocked on the door and waited, but there was no answer. *Strange, he said he'd be here.* Rapping again brought shuffling behind the door. Through the tiny peephole in the door, she glimpsed vague shadows hesitantly moving beyond. *Why all the caution?*

The door slowly opened and Grandpa stood there with a questioning look. When he recognized Kate, facial lines reversed and he broke into an enormous smile. "Kate, how wonderful for you to drop by. It's been ages, Sweetie."

"Grandpa, you asked me to come. It sounded as if you had something special to show me."

"Oh yes. My goodness, I thought I had dreamed that. It's hard to tell the difference since..."

Poor old fellow, he's losing it. Perhaps she could humor him a bit, and then use his phone to get a tow for her car. "You did call, Grandpa, and I'm here, so how about we sit in the living room for now. It's getting cold out here."

"I'm not as daft as I seem, Kate. Come in out of the chill. I'm just spending a lot of time with a new discovery. It paints visions for me, sometimes confusing,

and I wanted you to experience it.”

Oh no, some crystal ball thing? Have to tread lightly here. “What have you discovered Grandpa?”

“It’s been years since I cleaned out the cellar and made room for anything else. Thought maybe I could sell some of the junk. Your grandma used to shop all around the country for oddities. She was a believer in the occult and other things I considered nonsense. Anyway, I found a wooden box, and inside there was a kerosene oil lamp, one with a glass chimney. But it turned out to be a very special lamp.”

Kate sighed, preparing for a long story, but also curious. “What’s so special?”

“I wouldn’t have known, but there was an engraved message on the box’s inside cover. ‘Lamp of Knowledge. Gaze upon its flame and view truth becoming real.’”

She almost rolled her eyes. *New version of a carnival seer’s globe.*

“Didn’t pay any mind to the message to start with,” he continued, “but I took the lamp out and supplied it with a bottle of oil, also from the box. I lit it and, while watching, had the most curious feeling. It was like any doubt of its claimed purpose drifted away and I started seeing things.”

You need a shrink, not a granddaughter. “What did you see?”

“It was confusing and blurry at first, but then I recognized your grandma moving closer with that look of warning on her face, same as she had when predicting Hurricane Camille. Except this time she was talking about *you*. Said you had special talents the world needed. That you were a seed of greatness.”

“Me? I’m still in nursing school, like scores of others. How’s that—”

“Has nothing to do with it. You’re not aware of who you really are. Not all this came through words. It was as if some thoughts came directly through the

flame itself.”

“Now, you’re spooking me, Grandpa.”

“Spooked me, too, at first. Afterwards, I thought I’d just been imagining things. So I put it out of mind and came back later. This time, no doubt. Something’s delivering a message for you through this lamp.”

Kate looked away. She was curious, but also reluctant to humor his tale.

Grandpa gently touched her cheek, turning her face back, and gazed directly into her eyes. “There was an admonition, too. That you must make a choice, and to neglect it will lead to despair.”

Now that’s enough. “Where’s this lamp? If it has a message, I want it directly.”

“It’s on the table in the kitchen. Sit there and rest your eyes on it.” He led the way to the darkened kitchen, pulled out a chair for her and seated himself across the table. The lamp was already lit and faint smoke wafted up its glass chimney.

Kate took a breath and released it slowly. It looked like any other indoor kerosene lamp. She gazed through murky glass until eye fatigue made the flame seem to waver. Yet, there was no message, no words...In time, waves of vertigo began washing over her. The feeling of being drawn into a tunnel set her heart pounding. “No,” she blurted, and stood, her chair crashing to the floor behind her. “I’m not doing this. It’s creepy.”

Grandpa continued to sit. “If you gave it time—”

“I don’t want to give it time.” Despite her reluctance, there was a strange calling to what Grandpa had said and the sensation felt at the table. “I’ve got to think.” Kate left the kitchen and began pacing in the living room. She heard no words from the lamp. Maybe Grandpa had ESP, not her. And yet, it was impossible to ignore the feeling she was a part of this.

A childhood memory surfaced. Kate was not quite nine and her one-year older brother had climbed a tree and gone out on a branch too far to turn around. The branch began to bend, near the point of breaking. Despite his pleas for her to get help, she merely stood there, torn between getting help and a curious desire to see an accident occur. Would his bones break? Would there be blood? There was a compelling need to watch and examine tragedy. Eventually, he managed to work around, and, with the assistance of other branches, came down. He said nothing, but she read his face saying his sister was defective and unloving.

In high school, Kate had a boyfriend and they were inseparable. He loved her natural, wavy, brown hair, full lips, nice figure and cute, slightly upturned nose. She was drawn to his strength, manner of speech, dark hair, and personality, even the way he smelled. Kate knew she was in love—until he mentioned marriage. Thrilled for a moment, Kate could not place herself in that scene. She liked kids very much and once wanted to be a teacher, but a *mother*? With the obligation of raising children, cooking meals, and managing the household? He asked her what was wrong and her explanation faltered. She pulled away from him, and had stomach pains for a week. The agony in her soul was from the broken heart she caused herself. Kate realized she was different, and not in a good way.

A similar occurrence two years later thrust her into a severe depression. It coincided with her father's death and near household bankruptcy, which deepened the episode. The message written on Kate's brain was that she was hopeless and destined for a banal, lonely life. Grown now, the department store job and nursing classes were necessities, having little to do with desire or lofty goals.

Thus Grandpa's lamp vision that Kate was special, with an unrealized greatness, had a powerful allure. It granted permission to see herself as the loving person she was, but with a special purpose that justified an unconventional life. A Mother Teresa? Joan of Arc? Jane Austen? Clara Barton? Her heart knew this was

fantasy, but it inspired hope.

However, along with the appeal, the lamp's admonition hit her cold. "...you must make a choice, and to neglect it will lead to despair." What does that mean? She had already made choices, and they did not prevent despair.

Kate stayed the night and called for a tow the next morning. She and Grandpa never discussed his vision again; nonetheless, on an unconscious level, a token of the prophecy remained.

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Grandpa passed away two years later. Kate then graduated from nursing school with a Bachelor's Degree, passed the test for licensure as a registered nurse, and aspired to significant achievements in the world. For a long time, she had ambitions to join Doctors Without Borders. However, upon investigating the organization, Kate found the job experience requirement exceeded hers. Not only was this a huge disappointment, but blogs on internet job sites revealed that employment of newly graduated RNs that would provide that experience was rare in most hospitals, doctor's offices, and clinics. Even long-term care facilities hired mostly lower paid LPNs. Despite nursing shortages across the country, financials of the health care system squeezed human resource departments to hire few and at lowest cost.

Late one night, after sending out her first twenty-five resumes, Kate took a breath and shook her head. *Yes, it's a rat race out there.*

Her grandpa's face flashed in her mind. She could almost hear his voice and asked, "What should I do, Grandpa? I need a job. If I get employed for some menial position, it doesn't improve my resume." His voice, first clear, receded and she found herself reading his lips.

They seemed to say, "An offer soon. You must make a choice."

Kate nodded with recognition. *And to neglect it would lead to despair.*

“What does this mean, Grandpa?” Her question fell on air as his image faded.

*

That night, Kate retired late but did not sleep soundly. It seemed she was in the woods near Grandpa’s house, running along a path with overgrowth that whipped against her dress and legs. It was getting dark and no time to dawdle. Earlier someone had reported seeing a werewolf. If only the vines on the ground were less dense, pacing could be quicker. Eventually she had to rest, but upon stopping, the vines snaked up her legs, pulling downward. A piercing shriek burst from her throat. The musty smell of earth grew stronger as the creeping plants tugged her toward the ground.

A man stepped into the moonlight and smiled. “You need help in getting those things off. They come alive with the full moon and become a hindrance.”

As he approached, relief washed over her. “Thank you. Yes, I would appreciate help here.” She noticed he seemed to walk through vines without restraint. “How do you do that?”

“All full-moon creatures work as one.” When his fingers touched the vines, they drew back one-by-one. And the man’s hands grew larger and darker—with hair.

Kate raised her eyes and saw a grinning snout, lips drawn back, displaying long, sharp canines. In complete terror, she began a furious flailing of hands and feet, kicking, swinging—

She awoke with covers completely off her bed. It was an hour before she got to sleep again.

*

The next two days were more of the same. Read job requirements, fill out applications, insert resume and transcripts, eat a quick meal, and return to her efforts. Finally the nights came.

On the third evening the phone rang. Unaccustomed to late calls, she hesitantly answered. "Hello."

A pleasant voice inquired, "Ms. Kathryn Stevens?"

"Yes, who is speaking?"

"My name is Roger Brackhouse, legal counsel for a client who may be able to use your professional services. I've seen your resume; you were near the top of your class and you live in the vicinity of my client."

"Who is your client, sir?"

"Please indulge me for a bit. That would best be revealed later. We need you to understand what is required and to study a contract. A meeting at my offices would be appropriate."

"You know I've just graduated? My clinical experience is limited to that in nursing school."

He chuckled politely. "We accept that and are prepared to offer a salary twice what you would make in a hospital or private practice. Would tomorrow at 9:00 AM be agreeable? I'm at 209 South Dawson Street, Suite B."

Kate was speechless. *Opportunity so soon? At that salary?* She grabbed a pen and nervously scribbled the address and time on the back of an envelope. After a pause she answered. "That would be fine. I'll see you then."

She hung up not knowing what to think. Why wasn't she elated? Her recent nightmare surfaced. *Could this cordial offer turn into the werewolf? What is the choice I must make?*

*

The next morning, Kate remembered the intern she had met in school during a clinical rotation. Eugene was in medicine but also studied law, telling her that joining a legal practice handling medical cases was his long range goal. When pressure and confusion had her brain spinning, he helped her find balance. Also, he

was the other half of a mutual attraction neither of them had time for. She found a slip of paper with his cell phone number.

“Gene, this is Kate Stevens. I know I’ve been out of touch lately, but...could you go with me to a job interview?”

“You go girl, that was quick. I’d be glad to traipse along, but you’re a grown, degreed RN now, why should *I* come?

“There’s something unusual about it. Could be legal in nature.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow at 9:00 AM”

“Wow, nothing like spur-of-the-moment.” He hesitated. “I have a library study period then. I’ll meet you—Where?”

She told him the address and thanked him graciously. Then she retired and tried to sleep.

*

Gene was already at Brackhouse’s offices when Kate arrived, and entered with her. She told the receptionist that her friend would be meeting with them. After an intercom call, they were invited to enter the door behind the receptionist.

When they opened the door, Brackhouse stood and shook hands with Kate who introduced her companion. “Good to meet you,” the counselor said. “A little unusual for an interview accompaniment, but we have nothing to hide, so welcome, Gene.”

Brackhouse asked them about coffee, they accepted, and then he presented the contract. Kate poured over it as well as she could and let Gene see it. They discussed it in hushed tones while the counselor shuffled paperwork and stared at the ceiling.

After five minutes Kate finished and looked up.

The counselor said, “It’s pretty standard, except the salary, which you see is

significant. Now, a little about your charge. Or should I say ‘patient?’

“Mr. Robert E. Garlancio is a successful, retired businessman with a sizeable estate. Now in his late eighties, he’s outlived his wife and is in poor health. He has household help for menial chores and a personal physician who visits frequently. Some adult family members live in part of the mansion, but they seldom come to his rooms. You will be provided living quarters in the house but allowed off-days per terms in the contract. That time will be entirely yours, except for any emergency. Temporarily, you will have an experienced nurse as your preceptor. I think she’s one of the physician’s staff. You will regard Garlancio’s physician as your superior, as if you were working in a hospital. Any questions?”

Kate eyed the counselor, looking for a sign that would put her at ease. So far, the terms seemed as she had expected, but his demeanor gave no additional comfort. He was like a smiling photograph pasted over skillful guile. “I need time to think about this, please. And, at this point, I would like to meet Mr. Garlancio.”

“That can be arranged tomorrow. I will call you. Then we must have your answer. If you decline, we’ll move on to another candidate.”

“I understand,” Kate said. She and Gene departed the office with a copy of the contract and ancillary information. She had noticed that Gene was fidgety during the counselor’s last comments.

As soon as they were in the hallway, he blurted, “I recognize Garlancio’s name. He’s boss of a family that split off from the mob. Kate, this old guy was a crime lord. He was a kingpin they could never pin anything on.”

She felt as if teetering at the edge of an open trap door. “How do you know this?”

“My dad was in criminal law, and I remember some of the old newspaper articles he collected.”

Her first impulse was to barge back into Brackhouse’s office and decline the

pending offer. But Grandpa's face popped in her head. "*Wait, girl. Think about the choice. You have help, use it.*" Had providence put them together? She glanced at Gene, whose blue-gray eyes gazed back with affection. His black hair and build were appealing but he was also intelligent and familiar with things beyond her ken. *I'm not so alone.* She reached for his hand. "Gene, could you come over tonight and discuss some things with me? I think I might follow up with the visit to Garlancio."

That night, they talked about human nature, estate law, criminal law, ultimate purpose, and spirituality. Later, the mood turned affectionate. Kate asked him to stay the night, and they relished the postponed delights of the flesh.

*

The next day she rehashed the motives in her decision to meet Garlancio. The choices Grandpa mentioned now seemed clearer. First, declining the offer, taking whatever job she could get, even beneath her competence, struggling for enough experience to maybe get accepted into Doctors Without Borders, and doing her best to achieve something meaningful. The second choice was to take the job, but not at face value. To do so would be a kind of no-choice dictated by financial concerns and easy money. It could end in despair from the stigma of her association with crime families and little opportunity to shine where she wanted to achieve. No, the second choice was to accept the job—*provided* some other condition was satisfied. Her goal was to decide what the “condition” could be.

The call came and provided Kate the address and time to visit Garlancio. The butler and doctor's nurse admitted her at the front door. Her planned approach to the visit almost evaporated when she saw the intimidating richness of the interior. *Power shown here, made from evil.* She was led into a large room furnished with typical furniture except for the hospital bed, wheelchair, and medical supplies. In the wheelchair sat a sad-looking old man with skimpy white

hair and a blanket over his lap and lower legs. A nasal cannula led to an oxygen tank. He motioned to a comfortable chair beside him.

His speech was slow, but well articulated. “You are the seventh new RN to interview. Where did you go to school?”

She told him and he nodded.

“I may seem abrupt, but I have questions for you. As you can see, I may not be around to puzzle over things for long.” He paused for a extended, laborious breath. “...Do you know who I am?”

“You’re Mr. Robert—”

“Nah, I don’t mean that. Do you know what I did as a career? Back in the day...I would be called a mob boss.”

Kate’s face reddened at being put on the spot. *Can’t let him intimidate me.* “Yes, I have a pretty good idea.”

“Pretty don’t have anything to do with it. Do you think I’m a bad man?”

“I think you’ve probably done bad things.”

“What if I said the world has only winners and losers...that all of nature shows the strong eat the weak. What would you say, huh?”

“I’d say you’re trying to rattle me. What you said is true, but there’s more to it.”

“Might be, but I’ve always thought if I didn’t use power to get on top, someone would top me. Felt a right to ignore rules made by others...My services to the public gave them what they wanted. Violence only occurred when the law tried to protect them from their wants or another family tried to muscle in. If nature made some people weak, it’s for the strong to eliminate ‘em from the herd.”

When he looked directly toward her, she saw a shriveled mouth, turned down with bitterness. Above his rheumy, red eyes, thick brows turned inward in anger. Kate felt a cruel emanation. *There’s no good in this man.* Still, she

stubbornly replied, "Nature also has caretaking, group coordination, and affection."

The old man glanced upward and his next question surprised her. "Do you believe there's something on the other side? A way to burn out the karma from causing others pain?" His face lit up with an unexpected smile. "I made someone happy once. Finally got her to marry me. Thought that was all I ever needed, so I never told her about my business. In time she suspected, but...I ache with a desire to see her again."

He's actually concerned about the hereafter. "You're a complex man, Mr. Garlancio."

"Please, it's Robert. Nobody in my family ever talks about deep things...The answers I used to have in my cocksure days don't make much sense anymore—You want the job?"

Already? No more chat? Having prepared an answer, Kate now felt uncertain, and took a deep breath. "Here's the thing, Robert. I think you can eliminate some of that karma with a sizeable contribution of your ill-gotten gains."

He frowned. "The other RNs wanted to be in my will *before* visiting me. At least you waited 'til you saw me."

"I don't want to be in your will, Robert. I want you to set up a fifteen million dollar medical charity trust with me as trustee. I want to see it achieve something good."

Garlancio turned toward her, his brows knitted. "Get out! Nobody tells me what to do with my money." His head wobbled as if on a spring and drool appeared on one corner of his chin.

Kate stood and the nurse led her out.

*

The next day Kate tried to get back into the routine of a dull, unexceptional life. *I would call Gene tonight, but it might just pull him down, too.* Despite her

thoughts, need prevailed and she called him. He sounded tired, but agreed to come that evening and bring Chinese takeout. After hanging up, she reflected on the stress of the last two days, letting it move from facts to feelings. Sobbing shook her shoulders as salty rivulets coursed down her cheeks.

Something nagged the edge of her brain. *The lamp.* Kate went to a closet where a few items from her grandpa's house were stored. It was still there, in the wooden box. After pouring in a small bit of oil, she lit the wick, placed the glass chimney around it and set the lamp on the dinette table. Seating herself and staring into the flame was comforting. "Talk to me, lamp." Even after a minute, there was no sense of contact with advisors from the "other side."

In time, she became drowsy, yawned, folded her arms on the table and lowered her head onto them.

*

From the woods, she heard Grandpa calling her and ran as fast as possible to his door. It was nearly night and he had gone inside. Flinging the door open, she saw him standing with his back to her, hunched over some object on a long wooden table. Blood was dripping onto the floor.

He turned to her. "I caught the werewolf in my trap. I'm opening him up to let all the spirits of his victims escape. It's strange how the creature thinks."

Despite the gruesome spectacle, she was curious about the werewolf's anatomy, but more so with the voice she heard. It was a kind, rational voice, much like a recorded lecture. "Who is that talking, Grandpa?"

"The lamp. Close to the werewolf's head, it tells truths about him even he doesn't know."

The voice continued. "A werewolf's motives stem from intense fear to which he responds with aggression. It is mistaken as a lust for flesh. Compassion is not within his understanding, and a teleological quandary exists because the beast

is part human. The absence of something he cannot fathom creates severe anxiety about purpose. Killings are often attempts to gain from others something the creature lacks. A few werewolves have small families, but attempts to extend them create trepidation and a return to aggression.”

“I want to see him, Grandpa,” Kate said.

“Come closer, but be careful.” He moved aside. “It’s strange, this one’s old and he’s wandered around my house several times in the past. Looking in widows and making strange, low murmurings. I swear, he sounded like he wanted to talk. Could have broken in, but didn’t.”

“Do you think he wanted to understand people?”

“Don’t know, but if animals have souls, some might want to cleanse their spirit in their last years.”

Kate studied the opened body cavity. Slippery, tangled viscera were pink, blue, and puce. The heart was still, lungs quiescent. Looking at his head, the mouth in his long snout almost had a grin. She bent closer. The jaws popped open and a shrill sound burst forth.

*

Kate abruptly lifted her head, confused until realizing the phone was ringing. Sleep drugged, she arose and stumbled across the room for the phone. “Hello.”

“Ms. Stevens. I don’t know how you managed it, but the old—excuse me—Mr. Garlancio accepted your additional terms. Don’t know if he’s preparing to meet his maker after atoning for misdeeds, or if you have mannerisms he wants to have around. He used words ‘smart, honest, and deep.’”

Stunned, she shook her head to clear the fog. “That’s—You’re not kidding?”

“Oh no, a trust with at least fifteen million with you as trustee, beginning at his death. And, of course, the double measure salary in the interim. Congratulations. We’re getting paperwork together now. Could you come down

tomorrow?"

After the phone call, Kate could hardly wait for Gene to arrive so she could tell him the news. With an impulse to celebrate, she began prancing around in her living room and glanced at the lamp. "It really spoke to me, Grandpa."

In her dream, Grandpa had played the part of Life, capturing the werewolf like the years capture an old man and hold him hostage to his regrets. The lamp's voice and Grandpa's words echoed her own developing mindset: a willingness to extract the good that's mixed with evil.

*

Seven years passed before Kate became trustee of the medical charity trust fund. During that time, she treated Garlancio with the respect and care all elders deserve until the end. Some say he had a change of heart that confused his family, modifying his will to put those who best understood legitimate business in charge of his estate.

Kate attended night school in public administration while overseeing the trust. With Gene's help and that of investment advisors, eventually the trust's capital grew to twice its value. Then she became administrator and fundraiser of a charitable foundation that doled out ten million dollars per year while keeping the capital intact. Not large compared to major national charities, but it gave her immense pleasure to visit childrens' hospitals and retirement homes to see how her foundation could help. Kate named her charitable foundation Lamplight Charities. During this time, she also served a tour of duty as a nurse administrator with her beloved Doctors Without Borders.

*

Ten years later, a major television network set up an interview between Kate and the foremost student in a prize-winning community college media class.

"Ms. Stevens, what discovery did you make that gave you the greatest

inspiration?”

Kate hesitated a moment. “No single event. Mine came with piecemeal realization that labeling life events ‘success’ or ‘failure’ limits what can come from them. Sometimes great value is buried under muck or debris, but with a sense of mission in life, you can unearth it. My grandpa helped me realize that.”

“We hear that you recently hired additional staff for Lamplight Charities. Does that give you extra time, and for what?”

“It may seem reversed roles for most people, but *after* the professional highlights in my life, I now have a husband and a four year old daughter. I’m looking forward to spending more time with them.”

*

Upon arriving home, Kate’s husband and daughter greeted her at the door. A smiling Gene held Lucy in his arms and gave the child a brief kiss. “Lucy has something to tell you,” he said. “Go ahead, sweet.”

“Mommy, Daddy made dinner. I helped him mix stuff. He wanted to put candles on the table, but couldn’t find any.”

“Right,” Gene added. “Hope you’re ready. I’m as hungry as a wolf.”

“So long as it’s not a werewolf,” Kate said. “But no candles for this fancy meal, huh?”

“Not a total loss, I found your old kerosene lamp for atmosphere.”

“Ooh, I never told you about that lamp, did I? It has special emanations.”

“How so?” he asked, taking her arm and leading her toward the dining room.

“It’s a long story,” she said. “It all started when I was running through the woods toward Grandpa’s house...”

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