DON'T YOU WISH

Owen Matmor was an ardent, dedicated walker. Naturally, he enjoyed other activities -- such as bicycling and swimming -- but hiking was his favorite pastime.

A native of Dubuque, Iowa, Owen was single and twenty-six years old. He worked as an AC/ heating system repairman during the week, and moonlighted as a TV satellite dish installer in his spare time.

Over the years, he had hiked the Camino de Santiago across northern Spain. He had walked the Cotswolds Trail across part of southern England. In the United States, he had hiked large parts of both the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail in sections over several summers.

Now, while on his two-week July vacation in Croatia -- specifically at Plitvice Lakes National Park -- Matmor was eager to enjoy some new trails which promised to feature spectacular scenery and waterfalls. This area, in fact, was one of the most popular destinations for hikers in all of Europe.

The day was sunny and warm, with the sweet smell of wildflowers that had been refreshed by a brief rainfall the previous afternoon. Owen was resting on a large flat rock near the trail -- drinking from his blue, Camelbak water flask -- when he was approached by a tall, white-haired, senior fellow hiker. The stranger's face was ruddy but deeply lined with age.

*"Darf ich mich ihnen fur einen Moment anschliessen, um mich auszuruhen?"* the man asked.

When Owen looked confused, the man hesitated, then quickly switched to English and repeated himself. "I think maybe you are an American? May I join you for a moment to rest?"

Because the flat rock provided plenty of room, the young man readily agreed and made space on his left. He smiled and said, "Yes. I'm Owen Matmor, from Iowa," offering a friendly hand. The two men shook.

"My name is Dieter Jager, from Trier, in Germany. It is close to the border with Luxembourg. Do you know it?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Would you like to share some of my Toblerone?" Dieter offered, as he opened his worn leather rucksack, found the familiar triangular Swiss chocolate bar, unwrapped its silver foil, and broke off a pre-notched piece.

"Sure, Dieter...thanks!"

As other hikers occasionally walked by, singly or in small groups, the two men talked a little bit about their lives and where they had each previously hiked, pausing now and then to take sips from their water bottles. Birds broke any pauses in the conversation with relaxing chirps and songs.

"Well, I should be going," Matmor announced, after about twenty minutes of pleasant company. "Nice meeting you, Dieter, and thanks again for the chat and the chocolate. Good Luck and Happy Hiking!"

"I'm much older than you, Owen from Iowa, so I'll linger a while longer, and probably take a short nap. But before you go, I notice you don't use any hiking poles or a walking stick. I would be honored if you would accept my wooden hiking staff as a parting gift."

Jager held out the rod. It looked very old and was well-worn, about five feet long and 1.5 inches in diameter. There was a kind of slightly larger natural knob at the wooden top. Many years of sweat and rubbed hand oils had polished the dark wood to a bright sheen.

"This was given to me when I was tramping around as a young man --like you are now -- only this was about fifty years ago. I was in eastern Turkey, by Lake Van. The old goat herder who gave it to me claimed that the staff was made from a piece of wood from the actual Ark of Noah. Tradition said the Ark had come to rest -- after The Great Flood -- on the top of Mt. Ararat, which was visible in the distance from where he and I stood. But more likely, the rod came from somewhere else, perhaps neighboring Armenia, because any wood from the Ark would be so old that it would be virtually petrified and thus not carvable. To this day, I have no idea what kind of tree the staff was made from. But I'd like you to have it, Owen. You see, this is my last hike. I will retire to my home and my dear wife after completing the trails here at Plitvice Lakes. Next year, I will turn eighty years old. It is time."

Owen took the rod and examined it. He liked its heft, its balance and its sturdiness, as well as the story behind its purported lineage.

"It is a fine hiking pole, Dieter...so, if you are really sure you want me to have it..."

"I'm sure, Owen. It's yours now. But treat it carefully, my young friend...and I mean very carefully," the aged German added somewhat cryptically. Having said that, Jager sighed and took off his wide-brimmed brown hat, placed it over his face, and went down for his regular, mid-afternoon nap. So Matmor hiked onward, his gifted wooden staff now aiding his steps in keeping a reborn, lively walking rhythm.

Flying home to the United States as his vacation ended, the young Iowan checked his walking stick as luggage at the Lufthansa ticket counter, along with his hiking backpack loaded with his gear.

One Thursday evening in late August, Owen was enjoying a dish of strawberry ice cream as his after-dinner dessert while resting on his living room couch. He was watching the epic 1956 film "The Ten Commandments" on TCM. Matmor always thrilled at the scene where Moses (played by Charlton Heston) stretches forth his wooden staff and parts -- through the Power of God -- the Red Sea in half, so as to help the fleeing Israelites escape Egypt and the pursuing army of the wicked Pharaoh Ramses II (played by Yul Brynner).

After the movie was over, Matmor went outside into his modest backyard. The sun had set, and it was just beginning to get dark. The crickets were chirping and the lightning bugs were now out too, flashing their tiny yellow abdomens as they flew around. Owen's small lawn area was dry and mostly brown, however, so the grass crunched under his bare feet. Iowa was suffering from a severe lack of its usual rain that whole summer, particularly hurting the state's two most important industries: raising corn and hogs.

For a lark, Owen went in and brought his gifted European walking stick back outside. Raising the staff with two hands like Moses might do, he shouted to the sky, "I wish it would rain!"

Slowly, but incredibly, the tinged clouds began to combine and darken, and the wind shifted from west to north. Next, thunder began to rumble in the distance. Soon lightning flashed. And sure enough, it began to gently rain after about fifteen minutes.

Owen went inside. How cool was that! he thought. Could I have somehow caused that to happen, or was it simply a remarkable coincidence? For further testing and self-amusement, still clutching his wooden pole, he then said, "I wish the telephone would ring!"

And it did, mere seconds later.

It was his Dad (Matmor's parents lived across town), asking if his son had found his trusty Sears Craftsman's hammer, which his Dad had mislaid somewhere. "Maybe when we repaired that broken fence section last week?" his Dad wondered. Owen said no, he hadn't seen it, so the call concluded after a few minutes of further small talk. "Oh well, at least it's raining now," his father added. "We really needed it."

But Owen's mind immediately went back to his thoughts before the call. "I wish my kitchen radio would turn on," he commanded, holding the staff.

It did. The local Dubuque oldies station was playing some 60s pop music by Paul Revere & The Raiders.

"I wish the radio would turn off," Matmor said a minute later. And it did -- precisely as ordered, in the middle of a 'Stan's the Man' used-car sales commercial.

The young man was amazed. Who could possibly believe this? Four wishes with the hiking staff -- and four compliances. Owen carefully put the stick away in a hall closet and pondered its possibilities.

Matmor refrained from wishing again until the weekend. On Friday night, he took his wishing rod and decided to drive north along the Mississippi River to Marquette, where there was a moored riverboat gambling complex called the Casino Queen. When he assured the entrance security personnel that his wooden pole was not being used as any kind of dangerous weapon, but was just his 'lucky walking stick,' the two guards merely shrugged and let him bring it inside.

By wishing under his breath a few times while he gambled, Owen won $6,024 at the blackjack tables over the next ninety minutes. He was astounded! Later, at the casino's fancy bar, he spotted a very attractive young blonde lady who was drinking alone at the far end. Wishing -- while clutching his lucky stick -- in barely a whisper that she would find him irresistible and approach him, the young woman did just that, after about three minutes of rather sultry eye contact.

Matmor smiled as they introduced themselves. He bought her another frosted peach daiquiri, while he ordered a second schooner of Old Style beer for himself and they talked. Her name was Monique, and she lived across the river in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin.

"I come here all the time because there is nothing else to do on the weekends around where I live," she admitted. "The good men are already married, and the single guys are all dull or dim-wits," Monique sighed. "I need some excitement, adventure, and romance, or I'm gonna die!" She ran her finger over the rim of her daiquiri glass and then licked it, her sculpted eyebrows suggestively raised. "So tell me about yourself, Owen. What are you looking for in this crazy world?" She batted her deep blue eyes, and leaned in closer. Her perfume was subtle; she was not.

But things were moving too fast here for the young Iowan, so after Matmor spent another half-hour with Monique, he asked for her phone number and then begged off. "You seem really nice, and I'll call you, but I really need to get back home now," he declared. Taking his walking stick, he said good night, went out, got into his black Chevy pick-up truck, and drove home. I could easily have slept with her tonight, Owen realized, but in his mind the time wasn't yet right for any amorous antics under the sheets. I first have to figure out what is going on with this strange 'wishing rod,' Owen decided.

He mostly spent the rest of the weekend at home on the internet. Were there really such things as actual magic wishing rods in history? Matmor already knew that people made wishes when: blowing out one's birthday cake candles; finding a new penny; tossing a coin in a 'wishing well'; seeing the first star to appear at night; catching a leprechaun; blowing the total fluff off a dandelion; 'winning' the breaking of a bird's 'wishbone' with another person; seeing a 'shooting star'; or when having a ladybug land on one's hand. There were probably many more legends and superstitions regarding wishes from other cultures too, Owen understood. But nothing was found about any wishing rods, or sticks, or poles, or staffs -- other than the much smaller wooden 'magic wands' supposedly used by wizards and sorcerers for conjuring spells.

His restless mind next turned back to the staff that Moses used in the movie. Did such an object actually exist in the Biblical history of the real Moses?

Searching again on the internet, Owen Matmor found something called The Staff of Moses. (It was also referred to as The Rod of Aaron, whom the Bible says inherited Moses' staff -- being his successor -- upon the great prophet's death at the remarkable age of one-hundred and twenty.) The staff was now said to be safely housed in the Treasury annex of the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. Owen was very disappointed, however, when he saw the on-line image of that purported holy relic. The wooden staff was rather short and thin, as it rested in a protective glass case -- it was quite unlike the stout and formidable rod used by Charlton Heston in the movie! Or even compared to the staff I now possess, Matmor realized.

While at work all the following week, the young Iowan fantasized about how the unique wishing rod could bring him untold fortune and romance. He also wondered if or when he should tell anybody about what incredible things he had experienced thus far. As for wishing for immortality, perfect health, or world-wide fame, Matmor's thoughts and desires were not that advanced at this point.

Owen then came up with a plan. He would go up and down the Mississippi River and visit a different casino every weekend. He knew there were dozens of them. He would use his wishing pole to win a few thousand dollars here and a few thousand dollars there, so as not to arouse suspicion by getting a huge win in any one gambling establishment. After he had garnered enough money -- his goal was $750,000 -- he would quit his two jobs, confess about the pole to his parents and buy them a new house, then carefully move his winnings in small increments off-shore so as to artfully avoid the IRS. Finally, he would bet big on a major sporting event like the Super Bowl, and cash out -- his last act being getting a new false identity and moving permanently overseas.

Regarding women, Matmor figured he would seek out gorgeous, available ladies likewise at each different casino (avoiding the Casino Queen and Monique again in Marquette, for obvious reasons) and make them fall in love with him. He would hence score regularly every weekend. Who knows? he thought. Maybe I'll even find the woman of my dreams this way, he imagined. At least he would be adored by dozens of hot, young females! He would make Casanova look like an amateur! He would gleefully go through a gross of Trojans in no time!

Meanwhile, although he wasn't aware of it, Owen Matmor's personality was slowly changing -- and not for the better. He was becoming greedy, selfish, and conniving. To reassure himself that his staff's power was still working, he tried wishing with it from time to time on mundane things like making the hands of a household clock move backwards, or having several squirrels gather on his front porch together in a perfect circle at a given moment. The wishing rod always complied.

Soon, it was the beginning of the Labor Day weekend. Owen chose the Wild Rose Casino & Resort in Clinton, which was on the road just before reaching Davenport. He jumped into his black Chevy pick-up with his magical staff and drove south along the river.

When he arrived on the sizzling and humid early September afternoon, Matmor needed to walk past a black girl selling lemonade between the parking lot and the casino's grand entrance. She was neatly groomed and wore a sleeveless, white cotton dress, and was perhaps eleven or twelve years old. Her hair was fixed into two braids, one on each side of her head, sticking out by her ears.

She had made a cheerful, colorful sign saying: ICE COLD LEMONADE...50 Cents a Cup, or Three Cups for a Dollar. FRESHLY MADE WITH REAL LEMONS! At the bottom of the sign was added: Have a blessed day! (drawn red heart) -- Mattie.

Mattie was sitting on a green and white-striped lawn chair. The folding table in front of her was arrayed with a stack of 12 oz. red plastic cups, some yellow paper napkins, and a large glass pitcher filled with ice cubes and the lemonade. She also had an cardboard shoe box to act as her dollar bill 'drawer.' A small stack of silver quarters was next to it. By her feet was an insulated cooler holding a supply of more ice and lemonade.

Owen noticed that everyone ignored the girl's sales efforts, as they hurried to get indoors to the cool relief of the casino's air conditioning. He didn't want to stop or have any lemonade either.

As he likewise went by the stand, holding his hiking stick, a loud roar, then the squealing of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle startled the young man. He instinctively turned around to see what was going on, but as he did, he accidentally knocked over the girl's table -- catching a leg of it with his protruding wooden staff.

The large glass pitcher shattered into tiny pieces when it hit the cement, as cups, quarters, napkins, and dollar bills also went down on the sidewalk. Spilled lemonade and broken, fast-melting ice cubes were mixed in with the debris. The poor girl's sign was now similarly soaked and on the ground -- its careful, hand-drawn letters smudged and fading .

"OH NO! Look what you've done!" Mattie cried. "You've wrecked everything! And that was my Mama's favorite glass pitcher. It's a family heirloom...she got from HER Mama! She didn't want me to use it today, but I swore that I'd take extra good care of it. Now what am I gonna tell her, Mister?" Mattie started to sob, the realization of what had just happened hitting her hard.

There were other people in the distance of the parking lot, casually walking his way. Owen at first thought he could use his stick to wish and reverse all of the damage, but that would reveal his secret both to the girl and to other approaching bystanders. So he merely bent down and tried to help the girl right her table and put back some of its fallen items. He put his walking pole down so as to use both hands. He left the sharp glass shards where they laid. He didn't want to get his hands sticky or possibly cut.

But Matmor simply wanted this whole awkward scenario over and done with as quickly as possible. He didn't really care about the girl or her pitcher. He took out his wallet.

"Look, kid, here's $40. That should cover the damage. What do you say?" He held out two crisp $20 bills.

Mattie was increasing distraught and upset. "Your money isn't gonna help me, Mister, don't you see? My Mama's going to kill me when I come home and tell her what happened to her special pitcher!"

Still failing to understand the girl's plight with any compassion or deeper thinking, Owen said, "Alright...look, kid --here's another $40. That's $80 total and we can forget this ever happened. There now, what do ya say? Is it a deal?"

The exasperated girl then unexpectedly reached down and grabbed Owen's wishing staff up off the ground and threatened him with it.

"No! It's not a deal! I should whack you instead with this big stick to see how you feel!" Her eyes were hot with rage.

Matmor was stunned at the sudden turn of events. "O.K. Let's all calm down now...Give me the pole and we can talk about other options," he weakly urged, inwardly starting to panic.

"I don't want to talk with you anymore about anything, Mister!...Oh, oh...What am I gonna do? My Mama's gonna kill me..." the girl moaned. "Why did you have to do this to me? Why did you have to come here today and wreck everything?"

Still clutching the large wishing rod in both of her small hands, the emotionally overwhelmed girl said, staring into Owen's surprised eyes:

"Oh, oh..I just wish you were...DEAD!"

Matmor moaned and collapsed to the ground in mere seconds. Mattie gasped, then dropped the staff in shock and horror. As she began screaming, a curious crowd quickly gathered.

Owen's eyes were opened as he lay motionless, a disbelieving expression frozen on his face.

The paramedics later said it was such a shame that a man so young and healthy-looking should die so early in his life...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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