

The Professor and the Genie

by Barry R. Taylor

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Characters: Professor Dearborn, a forty-ish professor of English Literature
Genie, a modern version of the genie of Aladdin tradition, wearing a business suit

Setting: Daytime. Professor Dearborn's office. A desk and chair, angled toward the audience, with a book-laden shelf behind it and two more chairs in front of it. The desk is piled high with papers. It also bears a computer (angled so that the audience cannot see the screen), and a small glass oil lamp. Professor Dearborn is working away, grading papers.

[Cue 1: Stage black]

[Cue 2: Lights up, interior, daytime]

Professor Dearborn [looking up from his work]: I shouldn't have wasted money on that ridiculous lamp. [He picks up the oil lamp and inspects it carefully.] Martha will die laughing when she sees I've bought another antique. It's probably not even authentic. Wait, I think there may be an imprint on it. A date or something. [He rubs the side of the lamp with one sleeve, squints at it, rubs it again, squints at it again.] Rats. Nothing but scratches. I think I've been had. Again. [He shrugs, sets down the lamp, goes back to work]

[Enter Genie, carrying a satchel]

Genie: Professor Dearborn, I am a genie! I have come to grant you three wishes!

Professor Dearborn [still marking]: I wish for once somebody would knock before barging into my office.

Genie: Is that a serious wish?

Professor Dearborn [mildly annoyed]: Who are you?

Genie: I told you, I'm a genie. I'm here because you rubbed the magic lamp. Now, in keeping with long-standing tradition, you may ask of me three wishes. Wish for anything you want. Go wild! The power of the genie transcends time and space. I can grant you anything you desire: great or small, worldly or wise, noble or base. My capacity is virtually limitless!

[lower voice, without inflection] Offer valid except where magical gifts are prohibited by law; wisher assumes all responsibility for consequences of each wish, including taxes, fines and maintenance expenses. All wishes must be made within five working days; no recursions permitted.

Professor Dearborn: Are you done?

Genie: Yes. That's about it.

Professor Dearborn: Let me see if I understand this. You're saying that merely because I tried to buff a cheap lamp that I bought at a flea market, I get to make three wishes. And you will grant them, whatever they are.

Genie: That's the way it works. Standard contract. No recursions.

Professor Dearborn: What does that mean?

Genie: You can't wish for more wishes. Also, you can't wish that I didn't say that you can't wish for more wishes. And you can't wish that I didn't say that you can't wish that I didn't say –

Professor Dearborn: I get it, I get it. But otherwise I can wish for anything I want?

Genie: Anything at all! Let your desires run free as wild horses.

Professor Dearborn: Well then, my first wish is . . . hmmm, what do I wish for? [He looks down at the paper he is marking.] Oh ho, that's it!

Genie: What's it?

[Professor Dearborn holds up the paper. He points to the name on the top.]

Professor Dearborn: This student. She's a sophomore. Pretty blonde. She's taking my course in Elizabethan literature. When I say "taking", I mean she can take it or leave it.

Genie: Hold on a moment, let me conjure an image of her. [He begins to gesticulate.]

Professor Dearborn: She's on Facebook.

Genie: Oh.

[Professor Dearborn taps on his computer keyboard a few times. The Genie looks over his shoulder.]

Professor Dearborn: There she is.

Genie: Ah, a splendid choice! A fine and fey young maiden, gifted with poise, beauty and great hair. You want her as your mistress, no doubt.

Professor Dearborn: No, I want her to hand in her assignments on time.

Genie: You – What was that?

Professor Dearborn: She does everything at the last minute. I wish that, for once, she would realize the importance of her education and start an assignment a few days ahead of time instead of pulling an all-nighter every two weeks.

Genie: You can't be serious. I'm giving you a portal to possess a paragon of pulchritude. [He points at the screen] Look at this lovely, lissome lass: her eyes twinkle as bright as Arcturus; her smile is warmer than the desert sun; her figure curves like a road through the Himalayas. Yet you want . . . a better assignment?

Professor Dearborn: Look, the girl is coasting. She can do a whole lot better than the C+ she gets in every class. That sparkle in her eyes is intelligence, I can see it. Yet she won't apply herself. I wish that for once I could convince her to do her best instead of the minimum.

Genie: That's your wish.

Professor Dearborn: Yes.

Genie: You're sure.

Professor Dearborn: Absolutely. I'm not reaching her.

Genie: Did I mention her legs?

Professor Dearborn: Will you get on with it?

Genie: [sighing] Very well. [He gesticulates]

[**Cue 3:** Flash of light] Wish granted!

Professor Dearborn: Well? What happens now?

Genie: Look in your In-basket.

[Professor Dearborn looks through the stack of papers on one side of his desk. He pulls out a manuscript.]

Professor Dearborn: I would swear this wasn't there a minute ago. Wait, this is her next assignment. Two days early!

Genie [smugly]: Maybe she felt a flash of "genie-us".

Professor Dearborn: [begins to read] "A spirited debate: Opposing views on the role of the ghost in Hamlet". Goodness. [He flips to the first page, continues reading.] Well now, this is not bad, not bad at all. She's done some serious research here. Hmmm, still a few run-on sentences. [He idly picks up a red pen and begins to grade the paper, nodding approvingly from time to time.]

Genie: Professor

Professor Dearborn: [still reading] Hmmm, that makes sense, I suppose. Good point.

Genie: Professor!

Professor Dearborn: What now.

Genie: Your next wish.

Professor Dearborn: I get another one?

Genie: [reaches into his satchel and retrieves a thick book. He sets it on the desk.] Have you never read "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp"? And you a professor of language. You get three wishes. You have two left.

Professor Dearborn: You're like the genie from the Thousand and One Nights? I hardly think so. This isn't even the right kind of lamp!

Genie: I moved. I wanted a room with a view.

Professor Dearborn: [exasperated] Oh jeez. Look, if I remember rightly, the Aladdin story says nothing about a particular number of wishes. The Genie in that story served Aladdin his whole life, just like any other servant. Where did this limit of three come from?

Genie: We decided four wishes was too "Genie-er-us."

Professor Dearborn: Can I expect more of these stupid puns?

Genie: I spend a lot of time in that lamp.

Professor Dearborn: All right, whatever. Let me think for a minute.

Genie: Remember the power of the genie is without bounds. You can wish for anything your imagination can encompass and your heart can desire. The limits of time and space are as nothing to me, with a few exceptions noted earlier. You can wish for health or wealth or –

Professor Dearborn: I caught the power of the genie thing the first time.

Genie: Right.

[Professor Dearborn thinks deeply for a few seconds. He appears ready to speak, more than once, then changes his mind. The Genie waits with growing impatience.]

Professor Dearborn: I've got it! I wish for . . . a reserved campus parking space!

Genie: You wish for – You can't seriously – Have you been listening to *anything* I said?

Professor Dearborn: You said I could wish for anything I desire. What I desire is a place to park my car, a reasonable distance from my office, without buying a lottery ticket from the parking authority every morning. I desire to quit wasting twenty minutes every day driving around aimlessly with a dozen other commuters in some sort of demented, automotive game of musical chairs, while we all squabble over the last parking space on campus, which happens to be in the basement of an abandoned brick factory in another city. So, there's my second wish: a parking spot.

Genie: You're serious.

Professor Dearborn: Utterly.

Genie: Have you considered getting a bicycle?

Professor Dearborn: Have you considered winter?

Genie: Take the bus!

Professor Dearborn: Takes forever.

Genie: Well, why don't you just walk?

Professor Dearborn: Why don't you quit stalling and get on with it.

Genie: All right, all right, I'll see what I can do.

[He turns away, and begins gesturing in the air, as if manipulating players on a giant chess board]

Genie: He wants a parking space. I hate this job sometimes.

[The gestures continue, more complicated.]

Genie [to himself]: Let's see, we can move him over there, then that one can go – no that lot always fills by nine; we'll have to put him there, move her over to here, now those two can share, but that still only leaves . . . Confound it! [To Professor Dearborn] Does it have to be right by your building?

Professor Dearborn: No, I can walk. As long as I don't have to cross any county lines.

[More gestures, more muttering. The imaginary board grows bigger. The Genie wipes his brow.]

Genie [to himself]: That's good; now if we move these two over here, then we can put that one there. Right. Now, he works three days a week, so he should fit there; we'll move those fire hydrants, then the President can have that spot, and . . . yes!

[**Cue 4:** Flash of light] Wish granted!

Professor Dearborn [eager]: My own parking space?

Genie: Reserved for you, all hours of all days. Violators will be ticketed and towed. [He blows out his breath.] I have to sit down for a minute. [He sits. He pulls out a kerchief and dabs his face.]

Professor Dearborn: What could be so hard? You're a genie. Space and time hold no limits and all that.

Genie: Space and time are nothing compared with university parking.

Professor Dearborn: Don't I have one wish left?

Genie [sigh of resignation]: I'm afraid so.

Professor Dearborn: Very well. I wish –

Genie: Wait! Wait a minute!

Professor Dearborn: What? What is it?

Genie: Look, this is your third wish. Your last wish. Consider the possibilities! Wealth and power and fast cars and Hawaiian vacations and time-share Florida condos! You can have any of these things. Or all of them! You can have the world at your feet and Playboy bunnies at your door. You can have an endless supply of French wine, Russian caviar and Belgian dark chocolate! All you have to do is wish it!

Professor Dearborn: I . . . I don't want any of those things.

Genie: I don't understand. Wouldn't you like to cast off this job and live a life of luxury, excess and debauchery?

Professor Dearborn: Truth is, I rather like my job.

Genie: But . . . what about riches. I could give you a fortune!

Professor Dearborn: I make a good wage. Indexed pension. Medical and dental too.

Genie: Then what about women! Any woman you want . . . or more than one if you choose.

Professor Dearborn: My wife would kill me.

Genie: Travel to exotic locales, first class all the way, five-star hotels . . .

Professor Dearborn: We try to get up to the cottage in the summer. Besides, I travel a lot for conferences.

Genie: Oh by the Caliph's concubines, how I loathe middle-aged clients! Don't you have any ambition at all? Any unfulfilled dreams? You could be . . . Chair of the English Department.

Professor Dearborn: Please! Far too much work.

Genie: Aim higher then. Dean of the College!

Professor Dearborn: I'd sooner shoot myself. I like teaching.

Genie: Ah, then how about "Teacher of the Year" Award?

Professor Dearborn: Well I suppose . . . but does it really count if you don't earn it?

Genie [very nearly losing his temper]: By the desert and every camel in it, there must be *something* you want! Make your third wish count!

[A pause. Then, Professor Dearborn fishes around on his desk. He pulls out a well-thumbed manuscript.]

Professor Dearborn: Very well. Here is what I want. [He hands the manuscript to the Genie.]

Genie [reading]: "Early life influences on the romantic poetry of George Crabbe, 1754-1832, by Traynor Dearborn". What's this?

Professor Dearborn: My magnum opus. My great research project. My ground-breaking, contrarian review of the life of a respected English poet. The end product of countless hours in musty libraries here, in London, all over England, and endless nights at this desk,

losing sleep, ignoring my family and neglecting my teaching. My entire last sabbatical sank into that manuscript like . . . like a brontosaurus sinking into the La Brea tar pits.

Genie: In precision, I don't think there were any dinosaurs –

Professor Dearborn: It's a metaphor.

Genie: Right. Your third wish concerns this manuscript then? Fine, but remember, make it big!
[He hands the manuscript back to Professor Dearborn]

Professor Dearborn: I'm ready. [He points at the manuscript.] I wish –

Genie: Yes! I see where you're going now! Finally, a grand wish, a wish worthy of my attention. You want me to publish this, to get it accepted in the best journal in the land. You want to create a sensation and rock the ivory towers with your bold, radical vision. You want to fundamentally change the way we think about George Crabbe, and by extension all the great poets of his time. You'll be the earl of the English Department, a prince among your peers, the crowned king of the colloquia. That's what you want, isn't it?

Professor Dearborn: No

Genie: *No?*

Professor Dearborn: No. All that would be nice, but it's not what I want.

Genie: Then what under all the sun's brilliant glory do you want!

Professor Dearborn: Inspiration.

Genie: Inspiration? I offer you the world and you want *inspiration?*

Professor Dearborn: Inspiration is what I need. I've been working on that manuscript forever, but I can't *finish* it. I don't know what to say. I've read Crabbe's poetry until I can recite it backwards, and I've researched every facet of the man's early life, looking for a connection. I can't find one! Beyond the obvious that every critic has noted since 1832, I haven't any insights at all. The man's poetry seems to . . . appear out of the ether. Or maybe it was inspired by what he saw on the evening news.

Genie: In precision, in the 1700s I don't think there were any evening –

Professor Dearborn: It's a metaphor! The point is that I still don't know how Crabbe's early life informed his poetry. I'm missing something. Something profound, important. I know it. I can *smell* it. Yet I can't find it. So I wish –

Genie [angry now]: No! This is preposterous! By all the sand in the Sahara, I am not going to let you waste your third wish on something so trivial. Let me look at that.

[He snatches up the manuscript. He pages through it, evidently reading at remarkable speed.]

Genie: No wonder you can't finish this. It's all wrong.

Professor Dearborn: All wrong! What do you mean? I have meticulously researched every extant source –

Genie: You have pawed through camel dung looking for grains of wheat. This is still wrong. You're making George out to be far more serious than he really was. He was a bit dour sometimes, but the religious influence wasn't nearly as great as people believe.

Professor Dearborn [disdainfully]: How can you possibly know that?

Genie: Look, I knew the man. We spent time together in London in the 1790s.

Professor Dearborn: You mean . . . you granted him three wishes?

Genie: Nah, we were just drinking buddies. Buy that man a pint and he could pontificate on politics, poetry or punctuation right to closing time. Wonderful intellect. George could skip from one subject to another as freely as a stone skipping across a pond. [Pause] Never heard him tell a joke though.

Professor Dearborn: I don't believe a word of this. I've been working to understand the man's mind – and his poetry – for ten years and you're trying to tell me you know him better because you slipped out of your lamp for a drink now and then? Nonsense!

Genie: Twenty minutes in the company of a live poet is worth twenty years of reading about him.

Professor Dearborn: You knew George Crabbe? Then James Joyce was my second cousin. [He snatches the manuscript back and throws it on his desk.] Grant me my wish for inspiration and stop posturing.

Genie [angrily leaning over the desk at him]: Fine. You want inspiration. I'll give you inspiration, you hidebound parchment-scribbler. Maybe you can't figure out how George's life and land shaped his poems because they didn't. Maybe he was his own man with his own mind and his own muse and not merely the predictable result of his upbringing.

You and your ilk are so infatuated with finding psychological roots of everything, you have convinced yourself that every word thrown on the page is a direct response to a childhood trauma. You forget that George Crabbe and every worthy poet that ever lived were *thinkers* who came up with their own original, virgin ideas. They weren't sandstorms obeying the desert wind. They were *people*.

You want inspiration? Try showing that George Crabbe's poetry came from his own mind and *not* from his childhood. There's a paper that could genuinely matter. Oh, and don't forget to mention sausages.

Professor Dearborn: Sausages?

Genie: The man despised sausages. I never understood why.

Professor Dearborn: Wait, never mind that. I think you could be on to something. The *limitations* of early life influences on his poetry. That's what I've been missing. Of course!

Genie: Finally, some progress! Can we move on to your third wish now?

Professor Dearborn: Third wish? Why, you've granted my third wish. Inspiration! That's exactly what I needed. I can finish the manuscript now! Thank you!

Genie: No, wait. That wasn't . . . what about . . . publishing in a top journal, shaking up the establishment, doing the talk show circuit . . . and all that? What about movie rights!

Professor Dearborn: Well, I can do all that myself now, can't I! The research is done, all that's needed is to re-write the manuscript with a different direction. This is splendid! Splendid! I can hardly wait to get at it. [He sits down at the desk.]

Genie: Professor, you are hopeless! I have *never* had my talents abused like this. Serving you is like trying to teach a camel to tap dance. Well fine then, I'm off to the pub. [He picks up his book, throws it in the satchel and stomps off, then stops, turns back and picks up the lamp] And if you don't mind I'll give this to someone who appreciates my talents.

Professor Dearborn: In precision, that lamp is mine.

Genie: Ha! You wish! [Exit]

[Professor Dearborn leans back in his chair, puts his feet on the desk, grinning hugely, hands behind his head.]

Professor Dearborn: My own parking space!

[**Cue 5:** Three-second pause, then stage black]