

## From the Heart of the Iliad

While reading Homer's Iliad, in the original Greek, of course, I turned a page, and a curious figure popped up in the chair across from my desk.

"Hello. I'm here, not by happenstance, to hand you your heart's desire, if you'll heed my heart-felt help." He spoke without introduction. The figure appeared solid.

"Who are you? How did you get in my study?" I said.

"I understand your justifiably judicious judgment that someone is jesting with you. TV shows and lotteries entice people in a fog of flimflam stretching as far back as the ill-fated King Midas, and—we all know how that unfortunate affair ended.

Indulging the thing or person, whatever he was, I leaned forward. "You have a name?"

"Creatures like me create our own names. We choose by chance and change at will. For now, I take the title Tarot. I know you're Keir McGregor, an only child. Your parents died when you were in your teens, and you once worked as a lifeguard. You attended university on a scholarship. A few years in, you chose the classics, and now you're a university professor.

"Apparently in your world, privacy's not a big thing," I said. This had to be someone's bizarre prank. "I assume I'm supposed to ask you to demonstrate your power by doing some impossible feat."

"Why wantonly waste your one wish?"

I continued the charade. "Only one wish, not three?"

"Three is traditional, but times are tough—the economy and all," Tarot said. "There are limits to what I can do. I can't time travel—go back and prevent the assassination of Lincoln or change the outcome of the Vietnam War. And I don't have the power of life or death. I can't dispatch someone you despise, or disgorge some-one from the dead." His eyes twinkled as his hands did a flourish. A small puff of smoke drifted upward, but in fact, nothing happened.

"OK. I'll go along with it. What *can* you grant?"

"I can do healings, what were once called exorcisms—give a bitter body a better spirit. If you know someone who's a pest, I can prevent that. I can grant or take away material goods, make someone rich, including yourself—or poor."

I thought, *I might as well have some fun with this as long as it lasts*. "You know, you don't *look* the part. You're not dressed in a turban or wearing pantaloons or sporting a handlebar mustache."

"I dress for the times. For good or ill, I'm here because you decided to read the *Iliad*. You came to page 132 where I'm bookmarked, so here I am. I'm intrigued by your interest in the Iliad."

“You’re right. I do teach at the university, and I am a fan of all things Greek, but, of course—you know that.” I had to see how far I could take the joke. “Regarding the wish, how long do I have to make up my mind?”

“Any reasonable amount of time. Most people select from the great trilogy: wealth, fame, and power. Wealth wins by a landslide, but I warn you. Many are unable to manage money smartly. After a month or more, many are mooching money on Main Street. Possessions are not always partnered with prudence, so if you’re thinking about wealth, ponder who you really are.”

“I know who I’m not. I’m not a shaker or a mover. I’ve never stayed in a five-star hotel or flown on a private jet. Or had servants to cater to my whims.”

“So, are you content in a world without great worldly trappings?”

“Wealth has never been among my top ten.”

“You have a doctorate—perhaps you’d like to enroll in MENSA and exercise your elevated erudition among the elite.”

“I admit that members of MENSA have some outstanding qualifications,” I said. “Degrees mean something, but owning a piece of paper doesn’t make anyone wiser.”

The figure scratched his head. “I like your distinction between education and wisdom. Solomon asked for wisdom. He got it, but wealth and power snared him, and in the end, they were his undoing.”

“I can see this might take a while.” Tarot paused and squinted his eyes. “I await your pleasure. In the meantime, I’ll whisk away to Wonderland to work on another project.” And he vanished.

I half expected to smell burning sulfur or hear the eerie laughter of a mad man, but there was nothing. My badly worn book lay undisturbed. I was alone. *Was I dreaming? Is this thing for real?*

On my 15-minute walk to *Sam’s Suds* where Joe and I share a beer and catch up a couple of nights each week, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Joe was waiting for me with his elbows propped on the bar. We took our beers to a booth. “Joe, have you ever wondered what you might ask for if a magic fairy came along and offered to grant you a wish?”

“You mean three wishes, don’t you?” he corrected me without hesitation. “My first wish would be for the ability to heal people. I’d hold a person’s hand for 30 seconds. Nothing would happen. People would laugh at me and make fun of me. But the next day, the person realizes he’s healed. They come looking for me to help other people, but I’d be long gone.”

“Healing hands sounds a bit weird.”

“I never mentioned it to you, Keir, but before we met, I used to go to a little charismatic church in Ashton with my friend Dave. I was laying hands on people and healing was happening. It was cool. But that was a while ago.”

“So, what happened?”

“I don’t know. My beliefs got all garbled. It faded away.”  
“You’ve thought about a second wish?”

“I’d like to win the lottery. I’d help people with the money but keep enough to live on and travel. I’d meet some people, pay some bills, buy them a few things, and move on. I wouldn’t put cash in their hands, because there’s no telling how they might spend it, and I’m not into supporting anyone’s habit.”

I marveled. “And a third wish?”

“Health. Good health until the day I die, and then to die naturally. I don’t want to live forever, but I’d like to be healthy till the end.”

He paused, then asked, “How about you, Bro? What would you do with your three wishes?”

“I’m thinking it over. I like your idea of healing sick people, but it sounds a bit creepy.”

Joe said, “If you healed people and got well known for it, you could start a church, get a show on TV. You’ve already got the Southern drawl.” Joe has often pointed out that I still have “the South in my mouth.”

I didn’t tell Joe about Tarot. I was afraid he might think I was crazy, and I wasn’t so sure. Perhaps I was.

Walking home, I thought, *If I wished for wealth, I’d want a lot. However, wealthy people live in a self-imposed prison to protect themselves from good-time friends, scam artists, and crazies. Bill Gates or Warren Buffet probably have more bodyguards than the President.*

The next day, for a reality check, I opened the Iliad to page 132, and in an instant, he was there. “Hello, again. Have you come to a decision yet?”

I could hardly believe I was talking to this figure as if he were a neighbor who had just dropped in. “I’ll take a pass on wealth. I have no confidence in my ability to handle it, and not much of a yen to try.”

“And you a humanities professor.” He laughed slightly at my pun, although I expected a groan. “You’ve made a wise decision, or non-decision, as the case may be. I’m glad you didn’t gravitate toward greed. That raises you above the rabble and riff-raff.” He paused. “How about the arts? Would you like to be an actor, painter, author, musician . . . ?”

“I’ve thought about acting, I’ve tried painting and music, but I think my strongest passion is to be a writer. There’s something about the ability to mold thought and create the scene that’s interested me for years. I haven’t mastered the skill personally, but I can tell when it’s missing from something I’m reading.”

Tarot sank into the overstuffed chair facing my desk. “Do you have a theme in mind?”

“Something universal: love, life, death, the human condition, perhaps a sweeping saga—something specific, but universal. How are you at editing?”

“I’ve edited a few well-known titles, but none lately. What draws you to this option?”

“I think it’s the idea that when I die, I’ll live on—not like a spirit in heaven or as a ghost, but that my words are on people’s lips long after I’m gone—like Shakespeare or Dickens,” I said. “Considering the obvious choices, I’ve wondered if ‘none of the above’ might be the best answer. I have a pretty good life, a lady I feel strongly toward, a few close friends, a job as secure as tenure

can make it. I have more wealth than 95 percent of the world's population. I live in America. What's wrong with *that* picture?"

"Where's your spirit of adventure? This is your chance to get out of your safe zone, to encounter the unknown, to meet challenges in an open field instead of waiting for life to come to you."

I smiled. "Isn't life on the edge reserved for the young? They think they can't die. They live for the moment. I'm past that point in my life."

"You might be, but wouldn't that be a tragedy? To live life with no more surprises, no more 'ah-ha' moments, no more blazing points of light? It sounds like settling."

"Perhaps. I'll give it some thought . . ."

And Tarot was gone again.

As Clara and I drove to the beach where we were once lifeguards, a quick glance filled me with pride at having someone so beautiful and smart in my life. Ours was the only car in the parking lot. "You take the food. I'll bring the towels and umbrella. Today's a good day. The surf's not high. Seems we have the beach to ourselves."

I perched on a large towel with Clara stooping behind me. As she applied sunblock to my back, she asked, "What's the great mystery you had to tell me?"

I told her all about Tarot. She said, "Very funny—a little man jumping out of a book? Sheesh. You're making this up, right?"

"This is no joke. Tarot's no laughing matter."

Clara said, "Maybe you're not laughing, but it's so bizarre. I'd have to meet the little man and place my hand in his wounded side to believe. It's too incredible."

"I love that about you . . . practical . . . skeptical." I said, "Come home with me. After you meet my new friend, we can send him away and have a little privacy."

"There'll be no 'privacy' if there's a ghost running loose around the house, so you can put that out of your mind. Race you to the surf," she said, jumping up and running ahead of me.

The sea was only a bit chilly. My strokes were longer than Clara's, but I stayed beside her until we had swum out for a half hour. "We've come far enough," I yelled. Another 30 minutes and we were walking out on the beach. A gentle wind warmed us and we dried off quickly. Resting on a towel underneath an umbrella, I looked at Clara, lying on her back, eyes closed, hands across her belly. *I am one lucky guy*, I thought. I wanted her, but I was content to love her with my eyes.

Clara was silent on the short drive into town. Finally, with a twinkle in her eye she said, "You know, if you try to summon your friend and nothing happens, I'll have to have you committed."

I know she meant it as a joke, but I admit to being nervous. *I've told her this fairy tale of sorts. What if nothing happens? What if Tarot refuses to show himself? Could Clara be right? Maybe I am going bonkers?*

I shouldn't have worried. As soon as Clara sat down, I opened *The Iliad* and Tarot appeared for the third time. "Good day, good professor and . . . goodness! This must be the gorgeous gal you described so graciously."

Clara did a double take.

“Please, Clara. Don’t be confused. I’m confident Keir has confided in you correctly, being a trained scholar.”

“I—uh,” Clara stuttered.

Tarot held up his hand with his palm towards Clara. “You need no words. Wait, watch, and wonder.” Then he settled his attention on me. “Keir, have you decided?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Tarot, but no, I haven’t. Now that Clara has met you, she can help me explore the possibilities.”

“Fine. Your hesitation allows me time to tackle another task, not nearly so tricky as yours. A day or two should do it.” And he was gone. Clara stared at the empty space where he had been.

“What just happened? He simply appears and disappears? And he spoke to me, and to you. There’s no doubt in my mind if any of our friends got wind of this, we would be declared insane. Am I dreaming or something?”

“Those are the same questions I asked when I first met Tarot. Now I’m sort of getting used to the insanity. If he keeps his word, he’ll be back in a couple of days. That will give us time to try to make sense of it. Wipe that puzzled look off your face. Smile, and let’s have some privacy.

She finally said, “I can’t believe what I just saw. Are you sure he’s gone?” She shook her head, then offered me her hand, and we strolled down the hall.

The next morning, I hit the shower and shaved. The aroma from the kitchen told me Clara had fixed one of her home-style breakfasts. On these occasions, we cast all dietary cautions aside. Still in robes, we feasted on omelets, hash browns, orange juice, French toast with maple syrup, bacon, sausage, and hot coffee. The food is plain, the way I like it, except for the omelets. Clara empties my refrigerator crisper drawer. If it’s not nailed down, she works it into the mix. They’re never the same twice, and they’re always five-star.

In the middle of French toast, I said, “Great breakfast. You’ve outdone yourself. But, on to the topic. What are your thoughts about Tarot and the wish?”

“I can hardly believe I’m taking this ‘wish’ thing seriously,” she said. “Genies are not real. This is a scientific world. Some people have paranormal experiences, but not me. This has me stumped. I wouldn’t give it a second thought, except that I saw him with my own eyes. Maybe we’re both crazy.”

She raised a bite of omelet to her lips, and I wanted to kiss that mouth. I looked her straight in the eye. She knew what I was thinking.

“Eat your breakfast,” she said. “Keep your mind on the subject.”

“What if my wish is to be the world’s greatest lover?”

“Why wish for what you already are?” she replied. “But don’t bother. I’ve got to go to work.”

That evening at the bar, I said, “Joe, I want to bounce something off you. I’m going to tell you a story. You tell me how to end it.” I told Joe everything.

As the story unfolded, his eyes got bigger and bigger. He said, “Keir, you believe one of your fantasies may actually happen? And you’re not sure you want it?” I could almost see his brain running like a kid on the loose in a candy store. Finally, he spoke. “Give it to me. I’d run with it.”

“Transferability never came up. I’m asking you to help me with my decision.”

“If you don’t want it man, I do.”

“Joe, you’re not being much help. Can you focus for a few minutes?”

“Okay, I give. Not transferable. What about wishing for something like world peace?”

“Frankly, I think it might last about one day, then we’d be back to what we call normal. The same thing for wishing everyone to be healed. The next day, some kid at soccer practice falls and breaks his leg. I can think of nothing to wish for that would not fall victim to our humanity. Human life can’t be perfect, and life that’s perfect is no longer human.”

Joe’s eyes were gleaming. The wheels were turning. The imp in him was ready to spring. “Then how about working the other side of the equation? Not the human side, but the other side?”

“You mean—what? Making a wish that affects Tarot?” I had to take a deep breath. “Man—that’s mind blowing!”

Joe said, “Think you could bring Tarot into the real world?”

“Tarot as a human? Without his powers? Is it possible?”

At my desk near sundown, watching the bookshelves on the opposite wall gradually grow dimmer, strategizing about how to approach Tarot, I sat in solitude until the room was dark, trying to anticipate Tarot’s reactions. I dialed the lamp on my desk to its lowest setting. Taking the *Iliad* from the shelf, I placed it before me, unopened. My brain was spinning with possible scenarios when I opened the book to page 132. When he appeared, I closed the book.

“Keir, my boy. You’ve had copious time to cogitate, so what conclusion have you come to? I’ve told my colleagues about your conundrum, and they found it captivating, a first for us. Our clients rarely resist a call to wealth or power.”

“Tarot,” I told him, “what if—just what if—I wished for you to become human?”

“Whaat?” he gasped. “Are you messing with me?”

“Do I have the power to wish you into human form?”

“I feel an unfamiliar feeling. I must fly.” He said, frowning at the closed book. He pleaded, “Please, Keir, open the book.”

“First, tell me if it’s possible.”

“I don’t know for sure. I’ve heard lore about a lad in the library of a noble Latvian family. One of his father’s tomes accidentally toppled to the floor and fell open, ejecting one of my colleagues. The maid picked up the book, closed it, and returned it to a top shelf. My colleague had no escape. In a state of despair, the boy through tears wished my colleague were his pet and would stay with him forever. According to the story my colleague instantly became a wolfhound that never left the

boy's side. By the time the boy became a man, the wolfhound had reached old age. The pet died, and no one has heard from my colleague since. However," he added, "I'm not sure that answers the question."

"If it helps, I think of you as an equal, not as a pet."

"You know you're talking incarnation, don't you? There are stories about spirits taking human form, the most famous in the Western world being Jesus."

"Do you believe those stories, Tarot?"

"All cultures have incarnation stories. There's no way to verify them. My colleagues and I live in the present. For us to probe the catacombs of the past is pointless."

"Imagine, Tarot. you could know the joys and pains, the highs and lows of what it means to be human. As a perk, if you still had super powers, you'd be a hero. Stores would sell your action figures."

"And you think that's better than what I do now?"

"Perhaps. You wanted me to get out of my comfort zone. How about you getting out of yours?"

"Please, Keir, open the book. I must discuss this with my colleagues."

"Do I have your word that you'll return?" I asked.

"I must. I can't leave an assignment unfinished."

At the opening of my book came a whooshing sound, and he was gone. I had no idea how long it might be till Tarot returned.

No matter. I decided that Joe and Clara and I needed a conference—to anticipate the consequences of Tarot's becoming human. We should spend time imagining the scenarios.

"Do you want a beer, Clara?" I asked as we slid into a booth opposite Joe.

"No way, not if I intend to get any thinking done. Perhaps you guys should go light, too."

"Beer has no effect on Joe. If anything, it loosens up the hinges and gets his brain operating faster and more efficiently," I said.

"I'll take that as a compliment," said Joe, "no matter how you meant it."

Clara said, "If we assume it's possible for Tarot to cross over, shouldn't we ask how Tarot feels about it? Shouldn't he be part of our conversation? We're considering changing his whole universe, not just his body."

Joe said, "We're meddling in his life like he's meddled in others' for his entire existence."

I was concerned. I had grown to like Tarot, including his affinity for alliteration. If he crossed over, would he be lost to me forever? If I met him somewhere, how would I know it was Tarot?

Clara agreed with Joe, who said, "When and if you meet him as a human being, your best hope of recognizing him is if the first sentence out of some stranger's mouth contains a string of alliterations."

I decided. "I'm going to do it—wish for Tarot to become human."

Joe said, "You've got to let us watch."

"No, I think not. We have no way of knowing what will happen. If anyone gets hurt, it should be me, not you."

I waited for Tarot in my study. The *Iliad* open to page 132 was clearly visible. Just like before, without warning he was there. "Tarot, welcome back, buddy! How was your meeting with your colleagues? Did you get any answers?"

"I did not. They were as puzzled as you, Clara, and Joe were at your meeting. Yes, I was eavesdropping. At first, when I told my colleagues about your decision to forego your wish and your reasons for doing so, they laughed, hooting that you were probably the most foolish person who ever lived. They said, 'You're kidding. Surely he'll not reject this chance to have a dream come true. In all the history of time, no one has ever refused us. Even those who eventually bemoaned their choice, at least they tried.'"

I laughed. "So your colleagues agree that some of their clients should have said no, like I'm saying? Now that's funny."

"Funny to you, perhaps, but not to me. We don't have what humans call resumes, but we have records. If you refuse my offer, this will reflect badly on me. Our Leader was infuriated. You should have heard him, 'Who does he think he is? This man who's saying no to the chance to do something fantastic?' The discussion was heated. Eventually, the group voted to give you an award for being the wisest person we ever encountered. You choose—a million dollars, good health, or fame. You'd be our hero."

"Sorry to disappoint you and mess up your record, Tarot, but I've made up my mind."

The pained expression on his face showed several emotions, primary among them, apprehension. "Then at least give me the satisfaction of an explanation," he said shaking his head. "I just don't get it. Everybody wants something that's out of reach. This is like finding a stash of cash on the sidewalk. You pick it up, you're amazed at the amount, no one else is anywhere around. Do you put it down and walk away?"

"Sorry, Tarot," I said. "My mind is made up."

He continued. "Frankly, I'm mortified. If you morph me into a man, who knows what may follow?"

"This will be one hell of an experiment, my friend. Hang on to your hat." I could see the stark terror in Tarot's eyes. "Tarot, with all my good will and with highest hopes, I now wish for you to become human."

What followed was an eerie scream. I tried to come up with a metaphor to describe it to Clara and Joe. I compared it to the shriek of a child suddenly frightened by a nightmare, or the yelp of a man in a forest attacked by a grizzly, or a soldier screaming after his legs are blown off in battle. Those sounds combined still did not capture the gut-wrenching din that I heard.

After the racket, the silence was so thick, I felt like I was being crushed by it. I gasped. Was I inhaling fire? My throat burned. Then, just as quickly, it was gone. The room seemed normal. My copy of the *Iliad* lay open, still to page 132. Tarot was gone.



When Joe and Clara came over later that night, I said, “There was a scream when Tarot disappeared.” When the word ‘scream’ came out of my mouth, I shuddered.

Clara was holding my hand. “Keir, you trembled. What’s the matter?”

“I was just reliving the moment, I guess.”

Surely, I thought, Tarot must show up, somewhere, and soon. I waited for days that grew into a week. A second week I waited, and a third. Still nothing. After four weeks, I began to doubt I’d ever see Tarot again. Joe was peeved. “You wasted your wish. I would have done something with it. Now it’s gone and we’ll never know what became of it.”

What could I say? I said goodbye to Clara and Joe, and flew out to Los Angeles for a meeting of humanities professors, thinking, *Perhaps when I return, we’ll meet Tarot, and our circle of friends will grow by one.*

Out of the 2,000 attending the conference, I joined about 30 for a Greek seminar. Some people sleep through a lecture on the shades of differences between *agape*, *eros*, and *phileo*, but not me. The differences between divine love, human love, and brotherly love give insights to the Greek texts, all hidden behind the word *love* in English translations. The presentation was basic Greek, but the speaker had some good illustrations.

In the middle of the lecture, a professor type—there is such a thing—probably a few years older than me, entered and sat next to me. He put down plastic bags filled with books—books like vendors hand out at these affairs in the hope that one of his books might catch a professor’s eye, and the professor will either adopt it as a text or add it to his required reading list. The newcomer seemed as interested in the speaker’s analyses as I was.

Afterwards, others left, but he stayed. Extending his hand, he said with a slight accent I was unable to identify, “Hi. I’m Professor Theodore Tarotolli, Teddy for short. I teach at Trent University. And you are . . .”

*What did I just hear? Five ‘T’s? Theodore, Tarotolli, Teddy, teach, Trent?* “I’m Keir McGregor,” I said. “Greek literature is my field. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“No wonder. The number of people delving into Greek literature diminishes daily, don’t you think?”

My heart skipped a beat. Did I dare ask? “Professor, tell me about your background, where you’re from, and how you became interested Greek literature.”

“I was born in Italy. I went to school first in Switzerland, and then to Cambridge, where I read the classics. After finishing my course and graduating with honors, I received a letter inviting me to interview for a position at Trent. Right off the bat, I was hired and they made me chairman of their humanities department.”

“How long have you been teaching there?”

“I just started this term.”

“So, a year ago, you were at Cambridge?”

“Oddly enough, I’m not sure. Everything I’ve told you so far can be verified by documents I found among my things. The details surrounding those documents have escaped my memory. One should know more about his past than one finds on papers in his suitcase, shouldn’t one? A psychiatrist told me I had a rare form of amnesia that blocks out details of one’s life, but leaves one with the academic knowledge one has acquired. So, I am quite proficient in Greek even though I remember no details about my education or my past except what I find on transcripts and in legal documents.”

“What about your name, Tarotolli?”

“I researched that on Ancestry.com. Apparently, my name is unique. If I have no children, the name will be lost to history so far as their records go.”

“Let me take you to dinner, Professor Tarotolli. We must get better acquainted.”

