

Wong's Lost and Found Emporium

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The sharp clicking of high heels echoed in the dark shop. The brisk footsteps on the unpolished wooden floor slowed and became irregular and uncertain as my new visitor saw some of the stuff on the shelves. They always did that.

I was on a different aisle. The shop was very big, though crammed with all kinds of objects to the point where every shelf was crowded and overflowing. Most of the stuff was inanimate, or at least dead. However, many of the beasties still stirred when adequately provoked. The inanimate objects included everything from uncut diamonds to nailclippers to bunny bladders. Still more of the sealed crates and boxes and bottles contained critters, or other things, that might or might not be counted among the living. I had no idea and didn't care, either. For instance, whoever had hung big wooden crates from the ceiling—and there were plenty, up where they couldn't endanger anybody—must have had a good reason.

The edges of the shop were a little mysterious. I tried not to go too far down any of the aisles except the two big perpendicular corridors that ended in doors to the outside. They formed a cross in the center of the shop. The farther from the middle I went in any direction, the darker the place became, and colder. On a few occasions, I had had to go out to shelf space on the fringe that was mostly empty, and in almost complete darkness. All the edges were like that, except for the four doors at each end of those main corridors.

I didn't dare venture into the real darkness, where nothing was visible. Cold stale air seemed to be all it contained, but I wasn't going to investigate. I also had a suspicion that the shop kept growing of its own accord, outward into that nothingness. I had seen for myself that new stuff spontaneously appeared on all the shelves; but if the shop had been finite in size, it would have been absolutely crammed to the ceiling. Instead, I guessed, it simply extended its aisles and plain wooden shelves outward somehow, always providing just enough new empty space to avoid total chaos. The place was weird enough where I was; I didn't see any need to wander off the edge of the world or something.

I was seeking my destiny in this world, or at least I had been hoping to when I first came in here. My visitor was probably doing the same right now.

I came around the corner into one of the two main corridors, where the light was a little better. For a second, I thought I heard someone in one of the aisles, but that sort of thing happened all the time. Some of the live beings thumped and slithered in their containers occasionally.

My customer was a woman with snow-white hair, slender and well-dressed with a good tan. She wore a peach-colored suit and four gold chains around her neck. One hand with long, peach-colored fingernails clutched a small handbag. She looked like a shrivelled peach in a light snowfall.

"Oh—uh, I'm looking for Mr. Wong, I guess." She smiled cautiously.

"That's me," I said, walking forward briskly. After I had been here a while, I had put my signs on the four doors, saying **Wong's Lost and Found Emporium**.

She looked me over in some surprise; they always seemed to expect a doddering old geezer with a wispy white beard and an opium pipe, muttering senilities to the spirit world. I wore a blue T-shirt, fading Levi's, and Adidas indoor track shoes. After all, I'd only been here a few months, though time was different in here than on the outside. This was that kind of place.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She smiled apologetically, fidgeting now with all ten peach fingernails scratching at her purse.

"The name is Wong," I said casually, "but you can call me Mr. Double-you for short."

She didn't get the joke—they never do.

"Thank you. I, uh, was told that... this is an unusual shop? Where one can find something... she

lost?"

"If you lost it, I got it." Like most of the others, she needed more encouragement. I waited for her to ask.

"I mean... well, I suppose this will sound silly, but... I'm not looking for a thing, exactly, not a solid object, I don't suppose you have a... second chance?" She forced herself to laugh, a little, like it was a joke. "Well, no, I'm sorry. I really just need a restroom, and—"

"Of course I have it," I said. "If you lost a chance at something, it's here. Follow me."

I looked around the floor and pointed to the little blue throw rug. "Have to watch out for this. It slips."

She smiled politely, but I could see her shaking with anticipation.

I glanced around the shelves, looking for the little spot of white. "What's your name?" It didn't matter, but asking made me sound official.

"I'm Mrs. Barbara Patricia Whitford and I live here in Boca. Um—I was born in New York in 1926. I grew up..."

I didn't care. A bit of white light was shining on a shoulder-high shelf across the main corridor from me. "This way," I said, signalling over my shoulder. She shut up and followed me.

As we walked, the light moved ahead of us toward the object she wanted to recover. I had no idea how it worked—I had figured it out by trial and error, or I might say by accident. I had come in here myself looking for something I had lost, but the place had had no one in it. Now, I was waiting for the proprietor, but everyone else who came in thought I was in charge. So I was.

"What kind of chance was it?" I asked over my shoulder, like it was shoe size or something. It might be a long walk.

"Well," she said, just a little breathless behind me. "I always wanted to be an artist—a painter. I didn't get started until fifteen years ago, when I started taking lessons in acrylics. And even oils. I got pretty good, even if I do say so. Several of my paintings sold at art fairs and I was just getting a few exhibited, even. I got discouraged, though. It was so hard to keep going."

The white light turned down another aisle, more cramped and dimly lit than the last. The light was brighter in these shadows, but she couldn't see it. Only I could. I had tested that on earlier customers. Unfortunately, I couldn't see my own.

A shadow shifted in the corner of my eye that was not mine or hers, but I ignored it. If something large was loose in here, it was apparently shy. It was nothing new.

"Six or seven years ago," she continued, "all of my friends were going back to school. It was easier than painting—I went for my Master's; and since I was just going to go, I didn't really have to hurry, or worry about grades. It was the thing to do, and so much easier than painting. Only, I didn't care about it." Her voice caught, and she paused to swallow. "I do care about my painting. Now, well, I just would like to have the chance I missed, when my skills were still sharp and I had more time and business connections. It—I know it sounds small. But it's the only thing I've ever accomplished. And I don't have time to start over."

She started crying.

I nodded. The white light had come to a stop, playing across a big open wooden box on an upper shelf. "Just a moment. I'll get it. It's very important to get exactly the right one, because if you get the wrong object, you're still stuck with it."

She nodded, watching me start to climb up the wooden shelves.

"For instance, if I gave you someone else's lost chance to work a slow freighter to Sakhalin Island, why, it would just happen. You'd have to go."

"I would? . . . *oh*. Well, be careful." She sniffled. "No, uh, glove cleaner or anything like that. If you know what I mean."

The shelves were dusty and disgusting. My fingers caught cobwebs and brushed against small

feathery clumps that were unidentifiable in the shadowy aisle. Tiny feet scurried away from me on the shelves as I climbed, prodding aside old jars with my feet. Faint shuffling noises came from inside some of them.

I finally got my head up to the shelf with the little light. It was now sitting on a transparent cylindrical container inside the wooden box. Inside, ugly brown lumps swirled around in a thick, emerald-green solution.

The box had several similar containers and a lot of miscellaneous junk. I grabbed one of the smaller pieces at random and stuck it in my pants pocket. Then I tucked the swirling green cylinder under one arm and started down.

When I had reached the floor, I held it up. Her eyes grew wide when she saw the liquid spinning inside. "Okay," I said. "When you open this, the contents will evaporate very quickly. You have to breathe in the vapor before it disappears, or the chance is lost forever." I had done this before.

She took it from me, glowing like a half-lit wino.

"You can do it here if you want," I said, "but the light's better in the main corridors."

She nodded and followed me as close as one dog behind another.

We turned along the main corridor, and I walked at a good clip back toward my beat-up steel desk and battered piano stool. They were near the junction of the main corridors. This was her business.

Before I got there, I heard a slight gasp behind me and turned around. She had slipped on the throw rug and as I turned, her slender legs were struggling for balance. Her arms reflexively made a sharp upward movement and her precious transparent cylinder was tossed out to one side.

The woman let out a wail as it sailed away and smashed on the hard floorboards. She clattered after it clumsily in her high heels. When she finally reached it, she bent over and started sniffing around like a bowser at a barbecue.

I got up stiffly and walked over.

"Did I get it? Did I get it?" She whimpered frantically.

"Doubt it," I said, sniffing around. If the stuff had lingered long enough for her to inhale it, I would have smelled some residual scent.

"Oh, *no*—I... uh... but, but—" She started to cry.

Criers bore into me. I had a vague sense that I was expected to be sympathetic, but I had lost that ability. That's what I was here for, in fact.

"Wait a minute," I said, tapping her on the shoulder. I reached into my pocket for the other lost object I had taken from her box. It was a metal ring with four or five keys on it and a leather circle with "BPW" stamped in gold. The keys looked fairly new; I figured she had lost them some time in the decade or so. "Here," I said. "You lost these, too."

"What?" She looked up between sobs.

I gave her the keys. "I'm glad you came. Have a nice day."

"What?" She stared at the keys. "It was the *only* thing I ever accomplished," she whimpered. "Ever." She turned away, in shock, her wide eyes fixed blankly on her old car keys. "It was my very last chance." She squeaked in a high, tiny voice.

"That way." I took her shoulders and aimed her down the corridor that led to a shopping mall in Florida.

She staggered away, snuffling.

I sat down disgustedly on a nearby stool. My time was almost up. I had to leave soon in order to get any sleep at home and then show up at work tomorrow. Without savings, I couldn't afford to leave my job, even for something as important as this. If the proprietor had been coming back, then he, she, or it would probably have returned by now. The dual passages of time in here and outside meant that I had spent over two months here, and I had only spent one week of sick days and vacation days back in New York, on the other side of one of the doors.

I had even taken my job on a loading dock in Chinatown just to be near this shop. That was why I had moved to New York. When a friend had first told me about this establishment, she had warned me of the trickiest part—the doors could not always be located. Different people could find them at their own times, sometimes. The door in New York appeared, when it did, in the back hall of a small, second-story Chinatown restaurant. Most of the time, the hall ended in two restroom doors. For a select few, though, it occasionally had three, and now the mystic third door bore my sign.

I had checked the spot often; and when I had found the door, I had phoned in immediately for a week off, begging an emergency. It had taken some arguing, but I had managed. The presence of the restaurant had allowed me to stay so long, since I sneaked food out when night fell in New York. Naturally, the shop had a few misplaced refrigerators and other appliances; a few even worked.

Once I left this place, I might not find the door again for years— if ever.

I kicked in annoyance at a random bit of crud on the floor. It unfolded five legs and scurried away under a nearby shelf. Well, I had left a mark; the doors all bore my handmade signs, minor amusement though they were.

At least my stay had been eventful. My first customer after I had figured out how the place worked had been a tall slender Chinese guy from the San Francisco corridor. The door there was in the back of a porno shop. He had been in his fifties and wore a suit that had been in style in 1961, when it was last pressed. Something about him suggested Taiwan.

He had come looking for the respect of his children, which he had of course lost. I found him a box with five frantic mice in it: what he had to do was pet them until they calmed down. However, while he was gingerly poking at them, a boa constrictor glided silently out of the shadows unnoticed. It ate all the mice and then quietly slithered away. The guy got hysterical. I almost pointed out that snakes have to eat, too, but actually I didn't care about the snake, either. I'm strictly neutral.

My youngest visitor had been a little boy, maybe about ten, who came in through the boarded-up gas station in Bosworth, Missouri. It was a one-stoplight town that didn't send me much company. The kid wore jeans and a blue Royals baseball cap. He was looking for a dog whistle he had lost. I found it for him. Nothing happened to him or it. That was okay with me, too.

I sighed and stood up. No one else would be coming in. As I rose, I saw a large shadow out of the corner of my eye and glanced toward it, expecting it to slide away among the shelves as usual. Instead, it stayed where it was. I was looking at a young woman of Asian descent, wrapped up in a long white crocheted shawl. She also wore a denim skirt and striped knee socks.

"You're sickening." She spoke with elegant disgust, in New York accent.

I knew that, but I didn't like hearing it. "You've been here a while, haven't you?"

"I think about two days." She brushed back her hair with one hand. It was cut short and blunt. "You were asleep when I came in."

That was a relief. She didn't belong here any more than I did. On the other hand, she had apparently been watching me.

"Where've you been sleeping?" I asked out of curiosity. On my first day, I had spent several hours locating a sleeping bag.

"I found an air mattress," she said, still angrily. "I just meant to sleep until you woke up, but you had a—a client when I got up. After I saw the way you treated him—and all the rest of them—I decided not to approach you at all. Don't you have any feelings for them? When something goes wrong? You could at least try to help them."

"I don't sabotage anybody. Whatever happens, happens—good or bad or indifferent."

She tossed her short hair, probably less to move it than for the disdain it conveyed. "I can't stand it. Why are you so callous?"

I shrugged. "What do you care? Anyhow, some go away happy."

"*What?*" She looked astonished. "Can't you even understand simple—" She stopped and shook her head. "Maybe you'll understand selfishness. Suppose *I* want what I came for. I can't get any help from

you if I have trouble."

"Well, I guess that's logi—"

I stopped when she reached for a big stoppered metal bottle, on the shelf next to her. She heaved it at me, and I only had time to spin around. It hit my shoulder blade, hard, and bounced unharmed to the floor.

I whirled back toward her, ready to grab it and throw it back at her, but she was already striding quickly toward me.

"What's *wrong* with you?" She demanded. "I want to know! Why are you so callous?" She snatched up the metal container from the floor in front of me and held it wrapped in her shawl. "Tell me *now!*" she screamed, right in front of me.

I leaned forward and spoke, glaring into her eyes. "*I* came in here looking for my compassion. I lost it years ago, bit by bit. I lost it when I was eight, and other kids chased me around the playground for no visible reason—and they weren't playing. When I started junior high and got beat up in gym class because the rest of the school was white, like my grade school. When I ran for student congress and had my posters covered with swastikas and KKK symbols. And that was *before* I got out into the world on my own. You want to hear about my *adult* life?"

I paused to catch my breath. She backed away from me.

"I've lost more of my compassion every year of my life for every year I can remember, until I don't have any more. Well, it's here, but I can't find it."

She stood speechless in front of me. Letting her have it all at once accomplished that much, at least.

"Maybe you were in the wrong town," she muttered.

"You think I *like* being like this? Hating the memories of my life and not caring what happens to anybody? I said I've lost my compassion, not my conscience."

She walked back and put the metal bottle back in its place on the shelf. "I can find it," she said quietly.

"What?"

"I've been watching you. When you get something for someone, you follow the little white light that appears."

"You can see that?"

"Of course I can—anybody can. You think you're special? We just can't see our own. *I* figured that out."

"Well... so did I," I said lamely.

"So, I could get your compassion for you."

"Yeah?" I didn't think she would, considering all she'd said.

"Only you have to get what I want, first."

"You don't trust me, remember?"

She smiled smugly. It looked grotesque, as though she hadn't smiled in ages. "I can trust you. Because you know that if you don't give me what I want, I won't give you your compassion. Besides, if all goes well, your lack of compassion won't make any difference."

"Well, yeah. I guess so." I hadn't considered a deal with another customer before. Until now, I had just been waiting for the no-show proprietor, and then given up even on that.

"Well?" she demanded, still with that weird forced smile.

"Uh—yeah, okay." It was my last chance. I glanced around and found her spot of white light behind me on a lower shelf. "This way."

She walked next to me, watching me carefully as the white light led us down the crowded aisle. A large porcelain vase emitted guttural mutterings on an upper shelf as we passed. Two small lizards from the Florida corridor and something resembling a T-bone steak with legs were drinking at a pool of shiny liquid in the middle of the floor. The viscous liquid was oozing slowly out of a cracked green bottle. We

stepped over it and kept going.

The light finally stopped on the cork of a long-necked blue bottle at the back of a bottom shelf. I stopped and looked down at it, wondering if this deal had an angle I hadn't figured.

"Well?" She forced herself to smile again. It gave her a sort of tortured visage.

"What is it, anyway?" I tried to sound casual.

"You don't need to know, I know that, too."

"Suppose I don't get it till you tell me."

"I won't tell you. And you won't get what you want."

She couldn't have known I had to leave soon, but she was still my last chance. I would be getting home late as it was. Besides, she was the sort who might really want more compassion in the world.

"Hurry up," she said.

I knelt down and looked at the bottle. She might have guessed what I had focused on; but with all the other junk jammed around it, she couldn't be sure. Well, I knew she had compassion herself, already. She wouldn't want to regain any lost tendencies that were nasty, like cruelty or vengefulness, so I was not in personal danger.

I took the bottle by the long neck and stood up. "It's in here, whatever it is. If it's a material object, you just open the bottle and spill it out. If it's a chance, or a personal trait, you have to uncork the bottle and inhale the fumes as they come out."

She was already taking the bottle from me, carefully in both hands. I backed away as she sank her teeth into the cork and yanked it out with a pop. White vapor issued from the bottle. She started taking deep breaths in through her nose, with her eyes closed.

I backed away, smelling something like rotten lettuce mixed with wet gerbil fur.

She kept on breathing until the vapors ran out. Then she recorked the bottle and smiled at me, looking relaxed and natural. "Well! You're still sickening, but that was it, all right." She laughed gently. "Wow, that stuff stunk. Smelled like rotting cabbage and wet cat fur, didn't it?"

"Wha—?" I laughed, surprised at her sudden good humor. "It sure did."

"Okay, brown eyes. I see your little spot of light. Follow the swaying rear." She sashayed past me and walked casually down another dark aisle, humming to herself.

At one point, something on a shelf caught her eye and she stopped to giggle at it. It was a large brown and white snake, shoved into a jar of some kind of clear solution. She paused to make a face, imitating the snake's motionless expression. Here, of course, one never knew if a pickled snake was really pickled snake or something else temporarily in that guise. Anyway, she made a funny face and then laughed delightedly. After that, we pushed on.

When she stopped again, she was looking up at a shelf just within her reach. "There it is." She chuckled, without moving to take anything.

"Yeah?" I was suddenly afraid of that laugh.

She looked at me and laughed again.

"What's so funny?"

She shook her head and reached up on tiptoe with both hands. When she came down, she was cradling four sealed containers in her arms. One was a short-necked brown bottle encrusted with dry sand. Two were sealed jars of smoky glass and the last was a locked wooden box engraved with smile faces. She squatted on the floor Asian style and set them down.

"One of these holds your lost compassion." She looked up and laughed. "Guess which one."

My stomach tightened. I could not be sure of getting my compassion back this way. After my general insensitivity to people here, I didn't think I would ever be allowed back in, either.

"We have a deal," I said weakly. "You were going to give it to me."

"I have; it's right here. Besides, you should talk. And remember—if you inhale someone else's lost chance to wrestle an alligator or something, you'll wrestle it." She clapped her hands and laughed.

I stared at her. Maybe I deserved it, but I couldn't figure out what had happened to her. She had been concerned and compassionate before I had given her the long-necked bottle, and she certainly didn't seem angry or righteous now. I wondered what she had regained.

"Well?" She giggled at me and stood up. "One of them is it. That's a better chance than you gave anyone."

I looked down at the containers. She had no more idea what was in three of them than I did. "I have no intention of opening any of these," I said.

She shrugged, still grinning. "Have it your way, brown eyes. I'm leaving." She started strolling away. "Wait."

She turned and walked away backwards, facing me. "What?"

"Uh—" I couldn't think of anything.

"Bye!"

"No—uh, hey, what *did* I give back to you, anyway?"

"Oh!" She laughed. "My sense of humor." She was still backpedaling.

"I'll do it! Wait a minute."

She stopped and folded her arms. "You'll really do it?"

"Come on. Come on back here while I do this." I wasn't sure why I wanted company, but I did.

She came back, grinning. "If you got the guts, brown eyes, you can open 'em all."

I smiled weakly. "They could all be good."

She smirked. "Sure—it's possible."

I looked down at the four containers. The wooden box seemed more likely to hold a tangible object than a lost quality. Though this place had few reliable rules, I decided to leave the box alone. The brown bottle with the short neck had such a heavy layer of sand that its contents were hidden. I knelt down and looked over the two smoky jars.

"Come on, sweetie." She started tapping her foot.

Quickly, before I could reconsider, I grabbed both jars, stood, and smashed them down on the floor. The glass shattered and two small billows of blue-gray smoke curled upward.

She stepped back.

I leaned forward, waited for the smoke to reach me, and inhaled. One strand smelled like charcoal-broiled Kansas City steak; the other, like the inside of a new car. I breathed both in, again and again, until the vapors were gone.

After a moment, I blinked and looked around. "I don't feel any different."

"Sure you do." She smiled. "Just go on as normal, and it'll come clear."

"Okay." I bent down and picked up the box and the bottle. "Where were these? I'll put 'em back. There's a broom—"

"You?" She laughed gaily. "Well, that's something. You mean you're actually going to straighten up this place?"

"No, I—well, I've been in charge; I suppose I should do something..." I replaced the items where she pointed.

"Integrity."

"What?"

"You've got your integrity back, for one."

"Oh, I don't know..." I looked at her for a moment and then gazed up the dark aisle toward the light from one of the main corridors. "I guess I did lose that, too... Otherwise, I couldn't have been so cruel to people, even without compassion. They trusted me," I started walking up the aisle.

She followed, watching me closely. "So what are you going to do?"

"I guess I'll stay and run the shop." It just came out naturally. I hadn't even realized I was going to

say it. "The... other thing I got back is kind of minor. For a long time, I used to try to remember the details of a fishing trip in the mountains my family went on, back when I was little. I knew I had a great time, but that was all. Now, all of a sudden, I can remember it completely."

She cocked her head to one side. "Was it still really wonderful?"

I considered my new memories a moment. "Yeah."

"Aw..." She looked at me, smiling. "I can't help it, brown eyes. I give in. It's in that brown thing, with the sand all over it."

Excitement surged in my chest. "Thanks!" I reached up with trembling fingers and snatched it off the shelf.

"Careful—"

I fumbled it away. It hit my shoulder, bounced to the floor, and cracked. It rolled, and before I could bend down to grab it, it was under a bottom shelf. I dropped to the floor and slid my face under the shelf. The cracked bottle was hissing in the darkness as the special vapors escaped. I couldn't smell anything. It was too far from me.

I reached for it with one hand. It was wedged against something and stuck. I could touch it, but I couldn't get enough of a hold to pull it back.

I remained on the floor, inhaling frantically, motionless until the hissing stopped. Then, suddenly feeling heavy all over, I managed to stand up.

"What happened?" She smiled hopefully.

"It's gone," I muttered. "It... sure was over quick." I hesitated, then added, "Thanks anyhow." Stunned, I eased past her and started walking. I could hear her follow me.

We came out into the main corridor. I picked up the little blue throw rug and hung it on a nearby hook. Then I turned, all the way around, surveying my shop. "Maybe it was no accident."

"You were nervous, that's all—"

"I don't mean that. I mean my finding the door to this place when I most needed it, and staying until... someone came in to find my stuff."

"You think your new integrity adds up to something, it sounds like."

"My destiny."

She laughed, then tapered off when I looked at her calmly. "You serious?"

I shrugged. "This place is mine. I knew that, somehow, when I put my signs up. And now I owe this shop my best attention."

"With integrity."

I shrugged again. Taking care of the shop and its customers was important; the reasons I felt that way were not.

"I... think I got news for you, brown eyes."

"I don't want any news." I was still in shock from disappointment. It was justice of a sort, but it wasn't pleasant.

"You have your compassion back. I'm sure of it. You can't help it."

"But you said it was in the bottle I broke—"

"It was, as a separate quality. Only, I think your integrity comes with a little compassion in a package deal. Forces it on you."

I looked up at her, hopeful. "Really?"

"You could try it." She pointed down the Florida corridor.

"What's her name, the peach-colored former artist lady, had never made it out the door. She was sitting near it, slumped on the floor, an incongruous position for a woman of her age and dignity. The skirt of her suit was smudged and rumpled under her, exposing more of her legs than it was supposed to.

"This is your shop now," said my companion. She put a hand on my shoulder.

I didn't say anything.

"You can't just let a customer sit there, can you?"

"No—not anymore. A matter of—integrity."

"In this case, it's the same as compassion. I don't see how you can help her, but if you try—"

"I know how."

"Huh?"

"I lost one chance to help her." I smiled, suddenly understanding the true potential of this place. "If you'll go down the aisles and find it, we can fix up that customer after all."

She winked. "You got it, brown eyes."