

## MONEY IS NO OBJECT

by Leslie What

Leslie What lives in Oregon, but would like to move to Barcelona. Her Jack Russell terrier stalks her like they're in some sort of horror movie. She teaches writing at UCLA Extension and writes stories, essays, and novels. Her newest short story collection, *Crazy Love*, published in July 2008 by Wordcraft of Oregon, received a *Publishers Weekly* starred review. Visit Whatworld at [www.lesliewhat.net](http://www.lesliewhat.net) for news and silly pictures. Her latest tale for us reveals some of the problems a person can have if...

Her sister had laughed when the will revealed Alison had inherited the magic wallet. "So," she'd said. "You're rich. You pay for the funeral."

Alison had stared at Ellen, unable to ask why her older sister had given up the wallet without a fight.

They'd rushed off to the celebration of life, where hundreds of people had gathered, most of whom Alison could have sworn she'd never met. Everyone was drunk from the whiskey punch. A man holding an empty Tupperware bowl complained about having to wait for lunch.

The family was in the first group lining up for the buffet table: Alison and Jeff and their boys, Ellen and her husband. She worried there wasn't enough turkey to go around, so Alison chose roast beef. She watched her sister hoard two large frosted brownies between folded napkins. When Ellen transferred the brownies into her purse to make room for a turkey club, Alison saw the silver glint from their mother's iPod. "Hey," she said. "I was supposed to get that." They'd all agreed on this before her mother slipped into a coma. The iPod and the twelve dollar credit on iTunes were to go to Alison. Ellen was to get the frequent flier miles. They'd agreed. Alison turned to her husband Jeff and said, "It isn't fair."

"What did you say?" he asked. He was concentrating on a particularly skittish pickle. He speared at it four or five times before it stuck to his fork.

If ever she needed Jeff to multitask it was now. "It's not fair," she said. Their mother had specialized in pitting her daughters against one another.

Her husband reached for her hand. "There are worse things than having enough money," he said.

Alison stared at him and wondered where he'd been these last twenty years, that he could say such a thing and mean it. The burden of the magic wallet

had defined her mother. She spent her life worrying someone would steal it. She got stuck paying the tab every time someone invited her out for drinks. Friends and family depended on it, coveted it, resented it. But you couldn't just give it away because the wallet made you feel that without it, you were nothing. Emptying the wallet was a full-time job.

As everyone was leaving, the lawyer patted his jacket and said, "If you don't mind, I'll give this to you now." He handed Alison the magic wallet.

Though she'd never held it before she knew exactly what was expected of her and exactly how to behave, like magic. She opened the wallet but he waved her off.

"No time," he said. "I'll send my bill in the mail."

The caterer, however, needed to pay her staff. She wiped her hands on her apron, and held them out as Alison plucked dollar bill after dollar bill after dollar bill from the magic wallet. The leather was smelly brown, with fingerprints and worn spots from being pried apart.

"I'm hoping to get home before next week," said the caterer, eyeing the thickening bundle.

"Sorry," Alison said. "It takes a while." She took out another dollar, and another, and another, and another until she had counted out three thousand. The wallet produced one dollar at a time. It would never be emptied, but you had to wait a second for it to refill. You could only pay for what you bought, not save for what you wanted. The process was slower than a dot-matrix printer. Her feet were swelling from the squeeze of pantyhose and dress shoes. If time was money, what good was a magic wallet now, when even a good cup of coffee, meaning a latte, cost \$3.75, plus tip?

"Well," Ellen said on her way out, "Great to see you all. Guess we'll talk again when Mom's house goes on the market." Ellen looked more relaxed than she had in years.

"Bye," Alison said. "Call me if you need anything."

"Oh, she will," said Ellen's husband, which was not at all reassuring.

There was nothing else to say. They had entered a new stage of life, one in which their roles were reversed and Ellen would no longer be "the responsible one."

“Do you mind if we stop by the BMW dealership on the way home?” Jeff asked.

“Of course I mind!” she said, ready to bite him. What was he thinking? Did he have no idea of how long it would take to count out forty-five thousand dollars? She did. Twelve and a half hours. She had watched her mother pay Ellen’s medical school expenses, had heard her mother say she’d never do that again. And when it was Alison’s turn, her mother had steered her to a one-year program as an animal health technician at Santa Ana College. Her mother had justified it all by reminding everyone of the hours it had taken to cover the bill for the complications resulting from Alison’s Caesarean birth.

Her boys appeared out of nowhere and asked Alison for twenty dollars each to go paintballing. “No,” she said. “Not right now.”

“Why not?” they asked.

“Because,” she said, but she knew they would press her until she caved, and she couldn’t bear the fuss right here, right now. She opened the wallet to count out money into their open palms.

“Well,” Jeff said. “Guess I’ll quit my job.”

He was right. She could pull his yearly salary in two eight-hour shifts. She’d quit her job at the animal hospital because no one could pay her as much as she could pay herself, but she’d miss some of the work, some of the people, and all of the dogs and cats.

They left the hall and headed to the car to drive home.

In the back seat the boys grew tired of fondling their money and began to argue. “I’m gonna make you eat paint,” said the oldest. “I’ll gog you,” said the little one. “In your dreams,” retorted his brother. They paintballed on opposite teams and by the end of every game, the younger boy was in tears. It was an unfair match. The little one burst into tears now, as if resigned to his fate.

“Where do you want to stop for dinner?” Jeff asked.

“Hard Rock. Hard Rock,” the boys chanted. They would never again want to go anywhere without a gift shop.

The magic wallet had been given to her mother by an aunt angry after not

being invited to the baby's christening. At first the family had viewed it as a gift and not the curse that it was meant to be. Now it belonged to Alison. She decided to treat herself to a massage the next morning. Her husband was smiling, dreaming, no doubt, of Patek Phillippe watches and a bottle of the Macallan sixty-year-old single malt. The children took turns punching each other and stealing one another's money. Alison saw their lives unfold; the childhood bickering that would escalate until the day something as thin as a wallet with a one-dollar bill came between them.