

Third Prize

Son of a Bitch Stole My Wish!

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Derrick had lied to everyone else so well he'd almost managed to convince himself too. Almost. But divorce is hard, and being alone sometimes forces you to face the truth.

When he'd gotten divorced at 50, he'd done everything he could to get over it and not be that pathetic middle-aged guy sitting alone in front of the television. He went to group therapy, he took cooking classes, and he signed up for several local activity organizations. This last choice found him going for hikes on trails he'd meant to explore for the last twenty years, practicing conflict resolution with other willing beginners, and tonight, wandering out into the darkness with an all-ages gaggle of amateur astronomers to watch a meteor shower. And lie to himself.

"Isn't it beautiful!" Janice said.

"It certainly is," Derrick replied.

Janice was looking at the sky. Derrick was looking at Janice and, at that moment, not really lying. But then he reminded himself that while Janice was gorgeous, she was also almost exactly half his age and had never shown the slightest sign of interest—and he really didn't want to be *that* guy. And so he lied to himself and everyone else, pretending he wasn't.

After another moment of longing in the dark, he tore his eyes away and looked upward. The stars really were vivid in the cloudless sky and the quarter moon had just set, so they should have the best chance of seeing the **Perseids** they could ever want.

"What will you wish for?" Janice asked.

"What?"

"I know, I know. It is just a silly superstition," Janice said. "But if you see a falling star, what will you wish for?"

"Oh, let me think," Derrick muttered, not wanting to answer honestly. Other members of the group had caught up by that time, and they started shouting out increasingly ridiculous wishes in increasingly raucous tones. They started with "a herring" (Terry's wish) and moved up the staircase of silly. They got to "a conical pizza the size of the Eiffel Tower" (Caleb's wish) before the exchange dissolved into braying laughter, laughter that gave Derrick cover to mutter, "I wish I was young again."

"There!" Janice said, stabbing the night with a manicured nail. "There's one. Make a wish—oh, crap!"

The "falling star" she'd pointed at wasn't streaking past them in the dark anymore. It made an impossible turn and sailed right for them. The group scattered. Some ran, dragging their kids by the hand. Some threw themselves on the ground. Some threw themselves into what turned out to be blackberry bushes.

Even that last group counted themselves lucky, because the flaming projectile landed right where the group had been standing.

Derrick pulled Janice to safety—needlessly, since she was already there—then carefully released her shoulders. The astronomers emerged from the trees (bruised) and the bushes (bleeding), and crowded round to get their first glimpse of a meteor up close.

"Is that ... a scraggly old bird?" Caleb asked.

"And is it ... burning?" Janice asked a moment later. "Faster and hotter?"

It was, and it was. The flames around the bird that had fallen from the sky got taller, hotter, and more intense, until everyone was wincing or looking away. Everyone except Sharon, who pulled her eclipse glasses out of her fanny pack and was fine. And a bit proud of herself.

And then there was a pop! Sparks went everywhere. When the astronomers could see again, they saw a young bird. A strong bird. A proud bird who spread his majestic wings and flew away, leaving a pit full of ashy gray feathers behind him.

The astronomers stared at the departing phoenix in awe. For once, even the group smartasses were speechless. Everyone was silent except for Derrick, who muttered, “Son of a bitch stole my wish!”

When he’s not writing, **Greg Beatty** walks with his dog, dabbles in the martial arts, plays with his grandchildren, and teaches college.