

One Wish
by Alaina Wangsgaard

RRRRRIIIIIINGGGG!!!!

With the collective sound of hundreds of bells all over the school bursting to life, it's as if the entire building is cheering. *At last, at last, it's finally here!* Out of every classroom pour restless teenagers, ready to be done with school for the day. Because everyone's been stuck in classrooms with a bad case of cabin fever for six hours, the crowds in front of lockers are almost mobs. I'm at the forefront, pushing and shoving with the best of them. At last I succeed in retrieving my backpack and coat, and I'm hurrying to catch up with my friends as they step out into the frigid November air.

We walk quickly, laughing and buzzing with eagerness over our plans for the night, when suddenly a hunched-over figure in dirty, ragged clothes appears. Surprised, we all stop. It looks like a homeless old lady. *It is* a homeless old lady. She gives us a ragged, toothless smile and turns to dig through the nearest garbage can. We unfreeze and are just turning around to take another route when she calls to us. "Do any of you girls have any food?"

My friends keep walking, but on an impulse, I turn around and stutter that she can have my applesauce. I toss it to her, and she catches it with surprising dexterity. "Thank you, dearie. That deserves a reward."

"Oh, no, really, I'm fine," I say, looking toward my friends.

"I insist!" She holds up something in her wrinkled hand and forces it into mine. I look at

it. It's a stone, polished and white and smooth and flat. "This rock is special. It will grant you one wish." She waves a crooked finger. "*Just* one wish. Use it wisely, dearie."

I croak out a bewildered thank-you, slip it into my pocket, and it's all I can do not to sprint to catch up with my friends. I can still feel her eyes boring into mine the whole walk home.

* * *

By the time I reach my house, I've got two invitations to parties(my friends loooooovvve parties). I happily burst down the stairs. "Mom! Can I go to these parties on Wednesday and Friday?"

She doesn't even glance at the cards. "No. You need to babysit your sisters those nights."

This grinds me to a stop. I stammer, "B-but, but Mom--"

"I'm sorry, Suzanne, but we really need your help. Your father and I have to go Christmas shopping."

Steaming mad, I run back up the stairs to my bedroom and slam the door. My siblings always get the most attention. They take precedence over all my plans. Why can't I do something I want for once? I open my journal to vent about my misfortune-- and gasp. All the pages-- and I mean *all* of them, including the ones that were blank-- are scribbled on in black sharpie. I want to shriek. This journal cost me twenty-five bucks! I've only had it for a couple weeks, and now it's ruined. I'll bet I know who did this: my five-year-old sister, Maddy! She gets into *everything!* I'm about to go confront her when the doorbell rings. I open it. Oh, great, it's my other two sisters, Hannah and Isabel. Before her coat is even off, Hannah, my seven year old sister, asks, "Can I listen to your i-Pod Nano?"

I practically snarl, "No," and she instantly yells down the stairs:

"Mooooo-ooooom!!"

“Give her what she wants!” My mom replies.

It’s all I can do not to go into conniptions, but I hand over my i-Pod and stomp back to my room. About fifteen minutes later, I hear arguing begin to ensue between my seven- and eleven-year-old sisters:

“Give it back! She said I can use it!”

“You’re not old enough. Besides, she said I could use it last week!”

“Quit it! You’re gonna–”

CRACK!

Utter silence.

I dash out of my bedroom and into the living room, and am greeted with a scene that should be in a horror movie. There are my little sisters... and there is my iPod Nano, its screen utterly and irreparably demolished.

I can’t help it– I snap. “You little monsters!” I shriek. “You always ruin *everything!* Why can’t you just leave me and my stuff alone!!!!”

My mother is on top of me in an instant. “Young lady! Don’t you talk to your sisters that way!”

I swell in anger. “They *broke* my i-Pod! They always destroy *everything!*”

“Don’t say ‘always’! They’re not out to get you all the time. Besides, you didn’t mean it, did you, girls?”

My shaking intensifies. “You’re siding with them *again?* You *always* take their side! It’s not fair!” With that explosion, I run into my room and slam the door, flopping onto my bed.

I bury my head in a pillow and alternately scream and sob, rocking back and forth, and suddenly I feel a lump in my pocket. The wishing rock from the crazy old lady...

On a burst of impulse, I rip the stone out of my pocket, clasp it so tight my knuckles turn white, and scream:

“I wish I was an only child!!!!”

BOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!!

A thunderclap breaks loose, and all at once the floor starts to wobble and shake. I lose my balance and trip, hitting my head on the bed post and dropping the rock down the vent, and the world promptly goes black.

* * *

I wake up with a throbbing head a few hours later in somebody else’s room.

I know it’s not my room because, first of all, the walls are purple and sparkly- the room I share with my sister has blue walls- and there’s only one bed. Bewildered, I sit up and take in the unfamiliar room. Dominating one wall is an enormous bulletin board with hundreds of things- notes, photos, cards, keychains- haphazardly tacked up. The bedspread is a soft, fuzzy purple, as is the carpet. I’d like this room a lot, I decide- purple is my favorite color- if it was mine. But it’s not— which brings me back to the question of *how the heck did I get here?*

I stand up and walk out of the room, and I’m suddenly back in my house . The paint and some of the decorations- the oldest ones- are still there. I turn and look back into the purple room. What’s going on?

As I walk around the house, turning on lights as I go- the darkness indicates that it’s either the middle of the night or early morning- I realize something else is missing. On the wall where the portraits of my siblings and I hang, there’s only one picture. *My* picture. As if I’m the only child. What in the world...?

My thoughts are interrupted by a sound coming up the stairs. My mother’s head appears.

“Suzanne? Why are you still here? You’ll be late for school!”

“Mom?” I say, suddenly frozen.

“What?”

“Um, it’s just, um... have you been doing some... redecorating?”

“I’m glad you noticed! Yes, I did put up some new quotes on your bulletin board. What do you say?”

That’s not what I meant, I think. I realize she’s still waiting for a response, so I hurriedly say, “Um, thanks, Mom. I should probably get going.”

I’m halfway out the door when I stumble upon a thought: I *am* the only child, because all this is just a dream! A bizarrely nonsensical dream. That’s all. I chuckle to myself, and relax visibly as I walk to ‘school’.

* * *

After an extremely realistic imaginary school day, I begin to walk home. My friends are sick, so I decide to take the scenic route home. This involves walking past my sisters’ school- or what *would* be my sisters’ school, if they existed in my dream. As I’m walking past, the bell rings and pint-sized students start to pour out. I pause a second, smiling at their overall cuteness— and then I gasp as one all-too-familiar face tumbles out with the rest of them.

It’s Hannah!

What’s *she* doing in my dream world? I’m almost a little mad that my brain still produced copies of them. Curious, I shout, “Hey, Hannah!”

Her head turns, and she gives me a dubious look, then glances away. I call again, running after her. “Hannah?”

She turns to face me, genuinely frightened now. “Who are you? And how do you know

my name?”

This stops me short. “Don’t you recognize me?” I say softly. She looks me up and down, and shakes her head. “I’m your— I’m your sister, Hannah. Don’t you know me?”

Her look of fear returns. “No! What are you talking about?”

“Hannah!” A voice calls from behind me, and Isabel approaches. “Hannah, what have I *told* you about talking to strangers?” They both give me dirty looks, and Isabel leads Hannah away.

I stand there, watching them walk away arm in arm, surprised and confused and deeply hurt. My own sisters don’t even know me...

What kind of a dream *is* this?

* * *

I double back and take the normal route home. I’m so lost in my own thoughts that I hardly even notice the hunched-over figure until I nearly run over it. I look up, opening my mouth to utter the standard apology, but my mouth drops open instead.

It’s the old hobo lady!

“You!” I shout.

She nods. “Hello, dearie. Happy with your wish?”

“What are you *talking* about? This is all just a crazy dream. You’re not even real. *None* of this is! I can wake myself up, right now!” With that, I pinch my arm and squeeze my eyes shut. When I open them, she’s still there.

The old lady laughs. “Sorry, dear; but this isn’t a dream.”

I laugh right back. “Ha! How can it *not* be a dream? All the stuff happening here is impossible! There’s no way that all this could happen unless—”

Every muscle in my body suddenly goes rigid as I contemplate that one word. Unless what? Unless I was in some secret government program and this was all in my head. Unless I had traded bodies with somebody else and I didn't know it. *Unless I had made a wish on a little white rock that I was an only child.*

Uh-oh.

Slowly, raspily, I manage to squeak out: "Are you saying that all of this... all of this is real?"

She smiles at me sympathetically. "'Fraid so, honey. You made a wish, and this is your life now."

I remember the way Hannah and Isabel both looked at me, and I shudder. "Well, can't you fix it? Can't I just make another wish?"

In horror, the old lady shakes her head. "Oh, no. One wish per person. I can't change it, no matter how much I wish I could. I'm terribly sorry, dear, but those *are* the rules."

I can feel tears starting to well up in my eyes. "Isn't there anything you can do?" I whisper.

She looks at me sadly. "I'm so, so sorry."

The floodgates break, and I start to cry. "When I made that wish, I didn't really *mean* it! I never thought something like this would happen! Now I don't have anybody I can really talk to, and nobody I can share my secrets with! I want my *life* back!"

I sob for several more minutes, but when I look up, the mysterious old lady is gone. "NO!!!!!" I cry. "Don't leave me alone!" But there's no answer. As far as I can hear, the only sound is the rustle of leaves, and somewhere far off, my sisters being welcomed into a home that I can't ever call my own.

* * *

That night, after my parents send me to bed in frustration, unable to figure out my reason for bawling nonstop, I lie sniffing in my bed, tossing and turning. Somehow, my mind is clinging onto the vague hope that this really is all a dream. If I could just fall asleep, maybe things would turn out to be normal again in the morning. But I can't fall asleep, no matter how tired I get; there's a really loud clanking sound in the vent.

At last, I get up and walk over to the accursed vent and peer down. Perfectly visible in the near darkness is the culprit: a little, smooth white stone.

The wishing rock!

Eagerly, I dig my fingers down through the grates and fish out the little rock. I hold it in my hand a moment, staring at it. This one little rock caused me so much trouble, so much pain. I'm not even sure it can be fixed. But I'm in another world now, aren't I? One where I never even got the rock. Whether it works or not, I think, it's worth a try.

I grip the stone so tight my knuckles turn white, trying to think of the correct wording. "I wish... I wish that I never made my first wish."

BOOOOOMMMMMM!!!!

A crash even louder than the first shakes my room, and I barely have time to think, *it worked!* before my head cracks against the bedpost and my vision goes black.

The next thing I know, I'm standing in front of Hannah and Isabel again. I can see the look of horror on their faces, the broken i-Pod Nano in Isabel's hand, and I realize that I've been transported back to that crucial moment, the one that decided everything. I'm speechless, so Hannah's the first one to speak. "I'm so, sooo, soooooooo sorry, Suzanne. It was an accident, honest it was!"

I stare, astonished, for another long five seconds, and then a smile begins to spread, slowly but surely, across my face. “Ahhh, what the heck. That thing was getting old anyway.”

Now it’s their turn to look astonished. “Whaaaaat?” they say in unison. I giggle, just as my mom comes up the stairs.

“What happened?” She sees the carnage that is my i-Pod. “Hannah! Isabel! What did you *do* to your sister’s i-Pod?” She turns to me. “I’m so sorry, Suzanne. I’ll make sure they pay for another one.”

“Actually, you know what? It’s okay. I don’t mind,” I say, taking the three of them in. Just then, Maddy leaps up the stairs to see what the commotion’s about. I smile even bigger, and sweep them all into a group hug. “I love you guys!!!” I say, squeezing them. When I let go, they’re more bewildered than ever. But I just giggle, turn around, and start to walk back to my room, when an idea occurs.

I stop, take the unused wishing rock out of my pocket, and toss it to Maddy. Her chubby fingers catch it. “Here, Maddy, I want you to have this. It’s a really special rock.”

She looks down at it, then back up at me. “Why’s it so special?”

But I’m already headed back to my room. I smile knowingly and call over my shoulder:

“You’ll see.”