

1st Place (2021): Trish Palmer, With All My Heart

Uncle Gill wasn't his real name. Like so much about him, truth fuzzed into the shadows. He wandered into people's lives at will, staying just as long as suited his mind. I never saw him pick up a tea-towel, or broom, yet he was always welcome. The best meats and fruit were laid before him, not just by my mother, but also by neighbours keen to spend time in his presence.

He should have smelled rotten; his allergy to bathrooms was part of the legend. Clothes went on, but never seemed to come off. One year I spotted an old shirt of my father's hanging in rags behind Uncle Gill as he walked, leaving a Hansel and Gretel trail of cloth remnants.

I asked my mother about Uncle Gill, but she would only say that he was a special person, and not to bother him. That didn't make sense; adults would gather around him, hanging on to his outrageous stories of goblins and monsters, underworlds and constellations. His voice was deeper than any lake, as though speaking truths from some place beyond the Bible. Yet he could have his audience crying with laughter, relating stories of strangers, or people we all knew, in the most outrageous versions imaginable.

Uncle Gill's hair wound through taonga he'd gathered over many years. He would invite honoured friends to plait a piece of bone, a feather, or a shaped stone, into his dreadlocks.

My father said Uncle Gill was capable of making dreams happen. Like any child, I had lots of things I wanted, so this caught my attention.

One afternoon, when my mother wasn't around, I plucked up the courage to approach Uncle Gill; it wasn't easy to ask him if he could make dreams come true. His green eyes probed my brain, heating my face into a deep-red feeling.

Apparently satisfied with what he saw, Uncle Gill made an astonishing promise; if I could work out when he was in his magic place, he would grant me a wish.

For days I trailed Uncle Gill, waiting and watching, worried that I wouldn't recognise his magic place. It was hard to imagine him getting into the lotus position, or stripping off to dance around a fire, though the idea of him chanting unintelligible songs seemed perfectly plausible. On the other hand, maybe a crystal ball was secreted within his clothing layers? My tension rose as the days passed, fuelled by fear of whatever I might have unlocked; - could Uncle Gill be a warlock, an enchanter, or even a soothsayer?

Nothing happened. Eventually I threw away the list of things I wanted to wish for, and Uncle Gill moved on to heaven knows where.

A couple of years later, biking back from the market, I unexpectedly spotted Uncle Gill fishing from a rock on the coast. Dropping my bike, and Mum's groceries, I went over to say hello. He didn't seem so scary, sitting there all alone. He was gazing out to the horizon, apparently oblivious to the urgent twitching of his fishing line. He didn't seem to hear me, or notice when I gently took the line from his hand. A stunningly -orange snapper came in on the hook with much protest; it was going to make a fine dinner. I gutted it quickly, all the while watching Uncle Gill; was he ill? His unbreaking silence was worrying.

Not wanting to leave him, I perched on a nearby rock and waited. Lulled by the quiet sunshine, a peace descended, slowing my heart and thoughts. Even the waves seemed to mute into a quiet rhythm. It was a magical place.

'Exactly' said Uncle Gill without turning.

'What?' I asked.

'You found my magical place; now you may have your wish.'

‘This is your magical place?’ I didn’t get it.

‘Sit quietly, listen to the birds, feel the breeze, smell the ocean; drink it into your soul. Don’t just connect...., actually live in the magic.’ He roused himself, turning to me. ‘But you are wasting time; you have your wish, and your mother is waiting for her groceries, so get going. Just one thing, when you make your wish, it must be from your heart.’

How could he know about the groceries when he hadn’t once looked over that way? No matter, I had my wish.

All the way home my brain worked overtime, jumping from one idea to another. There were so many choices; with just one wish, this could be tough. Being a bit of a dramatic, I was quite capable of flinging out emotional references, so I wasn’t worried about Uncle Gill’s condition that it be from my heart. But attention to detail had always been one of my failings.

Should I wish for a game, or a book? Maybe new clothes, or a camera? I had more questions than answers...., like, how big could my wish be? Would it be greedy to wish for more wishes?

That night at dinner, my mother described a cousin’s struggle with asthma, and the fear of a losing battle. I fought to shove aside the notion that maybe I should use my wish to help. After all, this was my wish; I’d earned it. What was the point of getting a wish if I was only going to give it away? I liked my cousin, and wouldn’t want him to die, but the doctors would fix him, right? I didn’t want to waste my wish on something doctors could do.

Worse was to come. Dad said times were tough and our neighbours were near losing their home if their dad couldn’t get work soon. I liked our neighbours. My wish could do something for them, like find a job for their dad, but maybe he would find a job tomorrow anyway. Someone would have work for a good man like him. Then he’d be able to earn money, just like I earned my wish. I tried not to think about how I would feel if the neighbours lost their home when I could have fixed it for them.

Over the next few days it seemed everyone must have suspected I had a secret wish, even though I hadn’t said a word. People from all around came to our house, sharing their troubles with my parents. I tried to escape, but Mum made me stay. She said that I was old enough to listen. When the old man from up the hill cried because his son wouldn’t visit I nearly succumbed, but then a vision of a camera floated past my eyes. Dad could go and see the man’s son, and make him visit, couldn’t he? My wish was for me.

My mouth stopped working properly, mainly because my stomach didn’t want food, but to be honest, I had nothing to say. Mum would look at me, frowning, but she didn’t ask. How could I wish for something for me when there was so much trouble out there? Who should I help.... a sick person, a hungry person, or me? One wish. That’s all I had. My sleep became ravaged by nightmares, crowded with people demanding my wish.

Uncle Gill walked in one afternoon, plonking himself down at the table. He shared stories and ideas with his usual mixture of laughter, intensity and depth. I tried to stay in the background, not yet ready to face him. The wish swirled between my gut and brain, unresolved.

There came a point, though, when Uncle Gill looked over at me and asked the single word ‘Well?’

The strain of the last few days exploded under the kindness in his green eyes. It’s too hard! I don’t know what to do. One wish isn’t enough. With all my heart, I wish there was no wish!’

Silence.

Then realisation dawned.
'Oh,' I said, and crept away.
I had wasted my wish after all.

About Trish



Trish Palmer is an emerging playwright and short story writer who likes to make her audience laugh, be thoughtful, or both. Since beginning writing seriously in 2019, her short stories have been published in anthologies, and met with competition success. In June 2021 the non-fiction book 'Knock knock, confessions of a New Zealand interviewer' was published by Upstart Press.

Her first play Sarah Jane (covering adoption, and societies attitudes towards relationships between older men and young girls) premiered in 2019, with Garin College's drama students then using it for NCEA level 3. Her comedy work has been short-listed in Sweet + Short festivals, whilst two plays (one dealing with elder abuse) were produced for Youtube in France 2020. Sadly Covid halted five productions being staged in New Zealand during 2020. Trish feels very new to writing for an audience, revelling in the steep learning curve. Time with family, friends, and off-grid farming is augmented by gold-panning, fishing, and board or card-game sessions.

Trish has a Diploma in Creative Writing, and is involved with the local branch of NZ Society of Authors, enjoying sharing this writing journey with fellow writers.

Check out www.trish-palmer.com for more of her work.