

The Genie of the Butter Dish

The kitchen was strewn with newspaper, bubble wrap and boxes. On the worktop lay several rolls of parcel tape and a black permanent marker pen. Kate bent down, reached into the back of the cupboard under the sink and found a glass box. She straightened up and saw that it was a butter dish. The lid bore a relief of a cow, just so there was no doubt as to its function.

She gave it an automatic wipe with her duster and suddenly there was a flash of light and a deep, rumbling, slightly foreign sounding voice boomed out:

“Thank you for calling Intergenie, please hold, your wish is important to us and we will connect you to the next available Intergenie representative. Please note that your wishes may be recorded for training purposes.”

There followed ten minutes of music – Vivaldi’s four seasons, interspersed with a reminder every thirty seconds:

“Please continue to hold, your wish is important to us and will be dealt with as soon as a representative becomes available. You can rely on Intergenie.”

Kate continued to wrap and pack some glasses until she heard a new voice:

“Thank you for using Intergenie, this is Vijay speaking, what would you like for your first wish?”

“Eh?”

“You have rubbed one of our registered lamps and awakened a genie programmed to deliver three wishes.”

“Lamp? What you talking about?”

“Let me check, your signal came from unit number 2345654, which is a *tap tap tappy tap tap* Ah! That unit has been re-assigned, it’s now a glass butter dish, I expect it was the cuts, a lot of the more valuable lamps were sold on eBay, some of the others had to be disposed of as they contained toxic metals which are currently banned under COSHH regulations and were not ROHS compliant.”

“What? Are you saying that even the world of magic and mystery is feeling the pinch?”

“Intergenie is the leading provider of contract genie services, committed to facilitating and enhancing your wishing experience, whilst maintaining a cost effective service and logistics structure to the key wish provider consortiums.”

“So that means?”

“We’ve been outsourced to a call centre in Jaipur”

“OK, and I have to choose my wishes now, can I wish for anything?”

“You can, providing that your wishes don’t contravene the IGC code of practice, we are full members of that august body and we cannot offer anything that might put our 5 star rating in jeopardy. We cannot, for example, grant wishes that could be of political nature, or that could be construed as any kind of contravention of the European Human Rights Act, the United Nations Charter on Children, European Union directives or the rules of Monopoly”

“Monopoly?”

“Sorry, that was just a bit of call centre humour.”

“IGC?”

“International Genie Convention.”

“Well, I’d like some help with all this packing, we move in two days and I’m not even halfway through it yet.”

“That’s no problem; your help is at hand.”

There was a tap at the front door. Through the glass she could see two shadowy figures shuffling around in the porch. She opened the door.

“Yes?”

“Ello missus, we’re Dazza and Jordan, we’re doin’ community service and we’ve been assigned to you.”

“Oh!”

“We bin told to mention Vijay at Intergenie, we gets subbed out to some of these odd companies, all to do wiv the cuts, an’at.”

“Oh! You’d better come in then.” She stood back as they stepped inside.

Dazza stopped and punched Jordan on the arm:

“Oi Bumhead, Shoes!”

They both crouched and pulled off expensive looking trainers the size of coal barges. They carried them through to the kitchen and placed them on the floor. They then set about packing glasses and crockery into boxes, carefully wrapped in bubble wrap, taped down, labeled and stacked.

In a couple of hours the kitchen was packed, as was the sitting room and the study. The lads turned to leave.

“We’ll come back and finish off tomorrow if yer like?”

“That would be lovely, and thank you for the hard work and for respecting my carpets.”

“Uh?”

“Taking your shoes off”

“Oh no, it’s just that it’s really minging to get carpet fibres in your treads.”

The boys left and Kate went back into the kitchen. There was a bleeping sound coming from one of the boxes and, worried that the kitchen timer was going to bleep for the next two or three days she set about locating it and taking out the batteries. She found the box, neatly labelled “Kitchen, electric accessories 2” and peeled back the tape. The timer was there, in a ziplock bag, with the batteries and instruction leaflet taped to it. It wasn’t bleeping.

The next box down the stack was labelled “Kitchen, ceramic and glass tableware 3” the bleeping was definitely coming from within.

She re-taped the first box and open the second, on the top, carefully wrapped and taped in bubble wrap, was the butter dish. She lifted the lid:

“Hello, this is Karim, I hope you enjoyed your wish, can I get you to complete a customer satisfaction survey? It won’t take more than a couple of minutes...”

“OK”

“Thank you, firstly, did the boys arrive together?”

“Yes”

“Did they steal anything?”

“No”

“Were they polite?”

“Yes”

On a scale of one to ten, where one represents complete dissatisfaction and ten represents absolute delight, please tell me how satisfied you were with the work they did.”

“Twenty Five!”

“I’m sorry, I can only record a number between one and ten”

“OK, sorry, ten.”

“Thank you. Now can you tell me if you think it is better to use a community service sentence than impose an ASBO or a custodial sentence?”

“Huh? I er, community service, I suppose.”

“Thank you for completing the survey, you may now book your next wish...”

“Thanks, can I leave it for tomorrow?”

“Yes, certainly, all wish options are valid for six months from initial contact. Have a great Intergenie day.

Moving day drew nigh and tempers were becoming frayed. The incompetence of all the professionals involved never failed to amaze Kate as she stripped the bed and folded the duvet into a box.

The phone rang.

“Ello, is that Kate? Pikey Pete from the removal company, can you just confirm that it was Friday you wanted us?”

“What? It’s today! We’re moving today! Friday’s no bloody good!”

“Oh Dear! I think we have a bit of a problem.”

“There’s no bloody ‘we’ about it Pete, we were expecting you here first thing.”

“Oh Dear!”

“And stop saying Oh dear! Are you trying to tell me you aren’t coming?”

Kate slammed the phone down.

“Where’s the bloody US Cavalry when you want them?” Unseen by Kate, her foot was brushing the glass butter dish that was on the floor next to the box it had been packed in.

She heard a faint noise outside. It started as a distant rumbling, then became a rattle. Amidst it all was the sound of a trumpet.

She looked outside. Coming up the close was a large column of horsemen, dressed in dark

blue uniforms, some carrying lances with small pennants on them. Behind them was a wagon train. They wheeled to a halt on the front lawn. The one at the front of the column dismounted and walked up to the door.

He swept off his hat, revealing long golden curly hair.

“Lootennant Hiram P Warbecker at your service Ma’am”

“I don’t believe it!” she gasped. “Are you here to help me move house?”

“Your wish, according to my contract with intergenie, is my command”

“I’ve been let down by the removal men, they can’t come till Friday.”

“Removal Men? You want some guy taken out?”

“No, no, although it’s tempting, I need to get my furniture shifted to our new house”

The lootennant turned to his men.

“Bring up the wagons and form them into a circle, we got some shiftin’ to do!”

There were cries of “Yeehar” and similar expressions of exuberance.

“We ain’t had much call for our services since we put down the Redskins, we was glad to find the work.”

The smart and disciplined men soon formed a human chain and had the house emptied in little more time than it took to describe it.

“So, where we taking this stuff then?”

Kate pulled out the map and pointed out the road to Swanage.

“Looks OK ma’am, there any injuns on the way?”

Kate thought about it. She thought it best not to mention the Balti house in Wareham, there might be a scene.

Soon the column was mounted and ready to leave.

They caused havoc on the Blandford road passing through Hamworthy, traffic was backed up for over a mile as the column straggled up the hill. Things got a little better when they turned west onto the A35 dual carriageway and headed towards the Bakers Arms roundabout, the queue of caravans, Lorries and cars streamed past.

Kate stayed behind, the horses had left a lot of mess and she wasn't going to let the buyers think she didn't keep a clean house and garden.

Eventually she was satisfied and got into the waiting car.

"We'd better go through Wareham Forest so that we can get past all those horses, we'll rejoin the main road at Stoborough and be there in plenty of time to get the keys and open up."

Soon they were flying along the A35, marvelling at the queue of traffic in the left lane, waiting to turn south on the A351. After going straight on at the Baker's Arms roundabout, they sped along until just past the Golf club, where they turned left onto the Wareham Forest Road. It is a great road, straight as an arrow with marvellous switchbacks that made their hearts leap into their throats when taken at speed. Soon they were on the A351, and just in time, as they turned they could see the head of the column of horses in the mirror.

In a few minutes they had passed through Corfe Castle and were on the final few miles into Swanage. Leaving Harmans Cross behind them they crossed the railway, swung round the bend and were finally descending the hill into the town. Kate leapt out and unlocked the door. She got the kettle out of the emergency box and started to make tea.

Soon the noise of a column of horsemen could be heard clip-clopping down the lane; the hoof beats and shouts echoing off the high stone walls.

"Wagons Ho!"

The horses were picketed on the beach, much to the consternation of the council dog warden, who had approached the sergeant to remonstrate with him and had experienced a few nasty moments staring down the rude end of a Colt Peacemaker.

The troopers formed up and marched the few yards to the new house, where they repeated their earlier performance in reverse. As each wagon was emptied it drew away to join the horses on the beach

Within an hour all the furniture and boxes were safely installed in the new house and Kate gratefully sank into her new sofa. Nothing was damaged although there was a slight whiff of horse by-products lingering in the sitting room.

Down on the beach, however, things were starting to go from bad to worse. The troopers had been taking advantage of the all-day opening pubs. Horses were galloping through the surf, urged on by bottle wielding troopers who were whooping and hollering.

By the Pier a couple of old timers were providing music from their banjo and harmonica. Old Jed, the cook, soon joined them with his fiddle.

It was only a matter of time before the gunplay started. Drunken troopers were picking off seagulls with their Sharps Rifles.

Old biddies, out for their afternoon constitutionals, tutted:

“Elsie dear, they must be making a film.”

“Yes Doris, but where are the cameras? They have things called Dolly Grips and Best Boys, I could do with one of those, I wonder where they are?”

“I don’t know, but we must get back, you know how cross Matron gets if we are late for luncheon or afternoon tea.”

A fist fight had broken out next to the Mowlen Institute. The local Chavs were keen to get in on the action. Nike and Burberry print baseball caps washed up and down in the feathery surf, their owners mostly lying face down amongst the rotting seaweed, the good part was that the smell of the seaweed drowned the smell of the cheap deodorant that they used instead of washing.

The police helicopter chattered overhead, filming the scene.

The Ice-cream stall was turned over and the situation deteriorated into a riot.

The Punch and Judy tent was overturned and the Professor swallowed his Swazzle.

The mayor was frantically telephoning anyone he could get through to. He’d tried the Police Station but apparently the Swanage Constabulary was having a day off.

Eventually he got through to O/C Royal Tank Regiment, a few miles up the road at Bovington Camp, who in turn called his opposite number at the Royal Marines SBS depot at Hamworthy. Within an hour a massive force was on its way to Swanage, by land, sea and air.

A C130 Hercules droned overhead and deployed Royal Marines paratroops over the bay.

Tanks rumbled down Station road and beach assault craft raced around Old Harry Rocks from Poole Harbour.

Holiday making families ran screaming towards the hills.

Kate, alone in the house unpacking boxes, became aware of the increased noise levels. She stepped outside to see tanks rumbling down Kings Road East.

The crackle of gunfire came from the beach. Kate realised that something was amiss, and suspected that the cavalry were at the bottom of it.

She started to search furiously for the butter dish.

It was on top of the eleventh box she opened.

She grabbed it and rubbed it vigorously.

“Thank you for calling Intergenie, your wish is held in a queue and will be answered as soon as a wish granter becomes available.....

.....Your wish is important to us, please hold, please be aware that our wish may be recorded for training purposes.....please ho.....Hello, you’re through to Sanjeet how may I help you today?”

“Hello, can you help? All hell is breaking loose here; I need to get rid of these drunken soldiers. It’s a riot out on the beach.”

“Ok don’t worry, we will send them back straightaway.”

Sergeant Colin Farr of the Royal Marines Special Boat Services leapt off the front of the beach landing craft, cocked his SA80 assault rifle and squinted through the sight. His cross hairs settled on 78 year old Mavis Smith from Blackburn. She was seated on a deck chair enjoying a vanilla cone, her fingers protected from the cold dribbles by her tightly wrapped lace handkerchief.

He panned to the left. At the water’s edge 2 year old Conner Jones was prodding a dead crab with his red plastic spade.

Above him, in the amusement arcade, Darren Casey pushed his baseball cap back as he struggled with the intellectual challenge of a nearly complete row of lemons and the nudge button.

A passing seagull loosed his bomb load which fell in a line that included the white cotton cap worn by Reg Bates, a retired postal worker from Staffordshire.

As for the US Cavalry, there was no sign. No bullet holes in the window of Dot’s Café, no wrecked ice-cream stand, even the Chavs had staggered to their feet and sauntered off to the Job Centre. More importantly, there was no horse manure on the sand. There was an embarrassing interview in the mayor’s office.

“But I tell you, there was all hell going on, There was ‘undreds of ‘em! Horses, wagons, guns, lassos, whooping and hollering. It’s true, I tell you! Why won’t you believe me?” His Worship’s state of nerves was apparent in the valentine shaped patch of sweat on the back of his pure wool jacket. It took the combined strength of the Policies and Resources and Cemeteries committees to restrain him.

Later a private ambulance arrived and His Worship was lead away dressed in a fetching jacket that tied up at the back.

Kate was preparing sandwiches. She unwrapped a half pound block of Kerrygold and dumped it into an innocuous looking glass butter dish with a picture of a cow on the lid in relief. She placed the lid on, gave the outside a wipe with a cloth and put it into the fridge.

Nothing happened.

On the beach the waves lapped lazily onto the sand. The sun sank behind the hill, seagulls screamed mournfully as they wheeled around the bandstand, just another sunny summer evening in the sleepy seaside town.