

The Gift of Gab

Ryan Collins stared intently at the narrow stretch of road illuminated by his headlights. It was a dark, moonless night and he was driving through a state forest, returning from a meeting in a nearby town. The meeting ran late, and he was fighting off sleep as he tried to watch for deer that could bound onto the road. A few wisps of fog made him worry that the drive could get a lot worse if he didn't make it through these woods soon.

He saw something up ahead, but it wasn't a deer. Or maybe it was a deer that had been killed by a car. Sort of a brownish, shapeless mass lying beside the pavement. He was almost beside it when he suddenly realized it was a man. He slammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop a few car lengths down the road. He turned on his emergency flashers and ran back to the man.

In the flashing illumination from his taillights he could see that the man was curled up in the fetal position and trembling. "He isn't dead," Ryan thought. He didn't try to move the man because he didn't know what injuries he might have.

"Are you hurt?" Ryan asked.

"C-c-cold," the man said. "I'm cold."

Ryan carried a blanket in his car in case he got stranded in the winter. He ran back to the car, got the blanket, and covered the man with it. It was a cold, damp night. Not freezing, but certainly miserable if you weren't wearing a jacket, which this man wasn't.

"Can you get up?" Ryan asked.

The man nodded yes and struggled into a sitting position.

"Let's get in the car where it's warm," Ryan said. He helped the man stand up. The man was clutching the blanket around him. Ryan put an arm around his shoulders and helped him into the passenger seat of the car.

Ryan slid into the driver's seat and turned on the dome light. He got his first good look at the man huddled beside him. He'd realized when he helped him into the car that the man was short, and now he could see that he had red hair and a bushy red beard. He was wearing a faded green flannel shirt and brown corduroy pants. The pants were dirty and well-worn, but he had a surprisingly nice pair of boots on his feet.

"I'm Ryan Collins," Ryan said.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Ryan. I'm Dawayne," the man replied. He was still clutching the blanket around him, hunched forward and looking down.

“Well, Dwayne, let’s get you someplace warm.” Ryan reached over and grabbed the seat belt to fasten it around the man as he said this. “Where do you live?”

“It’s DA-wayne,” the man said. “Not Dwayne. A good Irish name. And my abode is wherever I chance to be when the sun goes down.” There was a lilting cadence to his voice, and he had a slight Irish accent. Not pronounced. Second generation? He didn’t object when Ryan fastened the seat belt around him.

Ryan put the car in gear and drove off. He was trying to figure out what to do with the man. He didn’t want to take him home, but he didn’t know where there were any shelters. Maybe if he drove to the police station they would take him, or at least tell Ryan where a shelter was.

They drove on in silence. Ryan noticed the man stopped huddling and sat a little straighter as he warmed up. Maybe if he got to know a little more about him, he’d have a better idea where to take him.

“Those are nice looking boots you’re wearing,” Ryan said as a way of making conversation.

“I thank you,” Dawayne said. “They’re my own design. It’s a bit of a hobby with me.”

There was a slight pause, and Ryan was uncomfortably aware that Dawayne was staring intently at him. Finally Dawayne spoke. “I’m a leprechaun, you know.”

Ryan stifled a laugh. “A leprechaun?” he asked. “I thought they were little people.”

“Ah, those were the leprechauns of fairy tales,” Dawayne said. “That was hundreds of years ago. Everybody was smaller back then. Sir Lancelot barely topped four feet, and he was considered a big man. Leprechauns are still shorter than regular people, but a few hundred years of good nutrition have done wonders for our stature.”

Forget the police station, Ryan thought. This guy’s going straight to the hospital. It’s probably best to humor him in the meantime.

“So,” Ryan asked. “Do I get a pot of gold for finding you?”

“Those fairy tales again,” Dawayne said with exasperation. “There is no reward for *finding* a leprechaun. There is a precedent for rewarding someone who captures and then releases a leprechaun, but it’s not automatic. And there is no pot of gold. Once a leprechaun gave his captor three wishes to release him, but you didn’t capture me. I got into your car willingly.”

“I saved your life,” Ryan said.

“I’m afraid that isn’t the case. You see, we leprechauns are immortal. Well, not exactly immortal, but we live a very long time and suffer no injury or disease,” Dawayne answered.

They rode in silence for a bit. They Dawayne spoke again. "Still, it was damned unpleasant being cold. You did save me from that. I suppose I could grant you one wish."

"Really," Ryan asked. "Anything I want will be mine?"

Dawayne chuckled. "Only anything that is within my power to grant," he said. "I'm afraid I didn't study very hard in magic school. A new pub had just opened across the street, and there was a cute barmaid working there. So, wealth, fame, miracle cures – I'm afraid I don't know how to make any of those things happen. Do you think I'd be dressed like this, freezing by the side of the road if I could do that kind of magic?"

"So, what kind of magic can you do?" Ryan asked.

Dawayne thought for a while. Finally he spoke. "I'm pretty good at the gift of gab."

This time it was Ryan's turn to chuckle. "Yes, I see that you are," he answered.

"No, I don't mean that I *have* that gift," Dawayne said. "I mean I know how to bestow it."

"Afraid that's not something I need," Ryan answered. "People tell me I talk too much already."

"Ah, but can you talk to animals?" Dawayne asked.

"I talk to my pets at home," Ryan admitted.

"Oh yes. Everybody does that," Dawayne said. "But do they understand you? And more importantly, can you understand them? That's the gift of gab I am talking about."

Visions of "Doctor Doolittle" suddenly filled Ryan's imagination. "That would be pretty cool," he said.

"Well OK then," Dawayne replied.

They drove in silence for a while longer. Ryan finally broke the silence.

"So?" he asked.

"So what?" Dawayne answered. "It is done. You have the gift of gab. What did you expect? A magic wand? Sparkles? Should I have danced and sung 'Bibbity Bobbity Boo?' I'm afraid you're thinking of the fairy tales again."

Ryan was too shocked to reply. They were entering the outskirts of town now. A sign up ahead proudly proclaimed a ratty looking building to be the "Sportsmen's Bar." A dozen pickup trucks and motorcycles adorned the parking lot.

“That looks like a charming little pub,” Dawayne said. “If you could just drop me off there I’d be much obliged.”

Glad to be rid of him, Ryan thought as he pulled into the parking lot. He’ll probably wind up in the hospital soon enough as it is. He waved goodbye to Dawayne and drove home. His dog ran up to him as soon as he stepped inside.

“Oh, Master! Master! I’m so glad Master has decided to come home! I lick your hand in my joy.”

The cat opened its eyes and looked disapprovingly at him from the back of the sofa. “It’s about time!” the cat said. “Where have you been? I can see the bottom of my food bowl and the cat box needs cleaning.”

Ryan stared at the cat in amazement. The dog kept licking his hand. Finally Ryan jerked his hand away. “Stop that!” He said.

“Yes Master. If Master does not want me to lick his hand I will not lick it. I’m just so excited to see Master. Shall I pee on the rug to show my excitement?”

“No!” Ryan said. “Do not pee on the rug.”

The cat walked up and rubbed against his leg as he said this. “You may pet me now,” she said. “But not with the hand the dog licked. Use the other hand. Not there! On my cheek. Yes, that’s right. That’s enough. Now clean the cat box and serve me my dinner.”

“Can we go for a walk?” the dog asked. “I really need to pee.”

“Can you guys just wait a moment?” Ryan asked. “Give me a chance to hang up my coat and sit down for a minute? I just got home.”

“Why would Master hang up his coat if he is going for a walk?” the dog asked.

Ryan cleaned the cat box and carried the bag of soiled litter out to the trash while he walked the dog. Then he served a can of cat food to the cat and a can of dog food to the dog. While they were eating he slipped into his bedroom and closed the door. He didn’t want to talk to any more animals that night.

When he woke up the next morning, he thought the leprechaun and the talking animals must have been a dream. It was a beautiful, sunshine filled morning. He stepped onto his deck to enjoy it, but his mood was ruined by someone swearing a blue streak. He had never heard such filthy language in his life. Not even when he was in the Navy. It took him a moment to realize the profanity was directed at him. A blue jay in a tree was screaming at him because the #*\$%& bird feeder was empty.

It didn't take long for Ryan to realize he did not want the gift of gab. He had always loved his pets, but now that they could talk to him they were driving him up the wall. The dog wasn't very bright, and Ryan found his obsequious fawning irritating. The cat's arrogance was equally maddening. She really did believe she was superior to all other creatures, including Ryan. He tried talking to other animals, but none of them had anything interesting to say. He asked a squirrel what it was like living at the top of a tree, and all he got in reply was a long, whiney tale about how irritating it was to have a flea bite you between the shoulder blades, where you couldn't scratch.

A friend of Ryan owned a farm, and Ryan visited him to see if the animals could tell him anything that would help his friend manage the farm. The chickens pestered him with questions about "what happened to our eggs?" - questions Ryan didn't want to answer. The goats just wanted to talk about food and sex, and the cow was the worst of all. The cow gave him a day by day account of which grasses she had eaten from which sections of the pasture over the past month. To make matters worse, she was chewing her cud while she talked. Bits and pieces of half-digested grass fell out of her mouth, whereupon the cow would lick the pieces back up, along with dirt, bugs, and anything else that was on the ground in the pasture. Ryan suggested she shouldn't talk with her mouth full but she replied that she chewed her cud all the time, so if she didn't talk with her mouth full she'd never get to talk at all.

Ryan reached the breaking point the following morning. He woke to the sound of a cockroach, hiding in a crack underneath the baseboard, calling him a mass murderer for having phoned the exterminator. Ryan knew he had to find Dawayne and get him to take back the gift of gab.

It didn't take him long to find Dawane. He'd long since been thrown out of the Sportsmen's Bar, but patrons there recalled seeing him at several nearby bars. The first three Ryan checked had already thrown him out, with instructions to never return, but Ryan found him nursing a beer in a dark corner of the fourth bar he searched. Ryan slid into the seat across from him.

"I need you to take back the gift of gab," he said.

"I'm afraid that's asking for a bit more than I can provide," Dawane answered. "To begin with, it's bad luck to reject a leprechaun's gift. I don't know if it's bad luck for you or bad luck for me, but I don't want to take the chance. And it wouldn't matter if I did want to take it back, because I don't know how to rescind the gift of gab. I believe I told you that I wasn't very attentive in magic class. I barely learned how to bestow the gift. I have no idea how to remove it."

"So there's nothing you can do to help me?" Ryan asked.

"Perhaps if I had a pint of ale I could think about it," Dawayne answered.

Dawayne polished off three pints thinking about it before Ryan left in disgust. Ryan had no idea what to do next, but he decided it would be a good idea to do a bit of research into leprechauns and leprechaun magic.

The following week Ryan started visiting bars, talking to bartenders, and looking for a particular kind of customer. It took a few days, but he finally found what he was looking for. A short man with a red beard wearing a red flannel shirt. He walked up to the booth where the man was sitting.

"I'll buy you a Guinness if we can talk," Ryan said.

"Well, now, I wouldn't be Irish if I turned down an offer like that," the man replied. "I'm fond of Guinness and I'm fond of talking."

Ryan set two bottles of Guinness on the table and sat down across from the man.

"You are most kind," the man said, after taking a healthy swig from the bottle. "I am not entirely without means myself, but for some reason they won't accept my shilling here. They probably don't know the exchange rate."

"Or maybe they know that shilling has a way of magically returning to your purse," Ryan said.

The man eyed Ryan with a mixture of surprise and suspicion. "You are an interesting fellow," he said. "What shall we talk about? My name's Flynn, by the way."

"I'm Ryan." They shook hands. "I want to talk to you about a leprechaun named Dawayne."

"And why would you be wanting to talk to me about this, uh, leprechaun? I'm obviously not a leprechaun myself."

"I was pretty certain you weren't," Ryan said. "Not with that red shirt."

Again the man looked at Ryan suspiciously. "They why did you choose me for this conversation?" He made an obvious point of peering into his empty bottle as he said this. Ryan ordered two more beers.

"I chose you because I think you're a clurichaun," Ryan said. "A close relative to a leprechaun."

Flynn opened his mouth to object, but stopped when he saw the serious look in Ryan's eye. He chuckled instead. "You're a clever lad," he said. "I am a clurichaun. Dawayne's my cousin."

"And your cousin gave me a gift I don't want," Ryan said.

"People usually wish they hadn't accepted a leprechaun's gift," Flynn said. "Leprechauns are fond of plying pranks. But it's bad luck to destroy a leprechaun's gift, you know." Flynn thought about this for a moment. "Damn tricky, too," he added.

"I don't want to destroy it," Ryan said. "Let's just say I want to relocate it. If you can do that for me, I'll owe you a few more pints of Guinness." He paused for a moment before continuing. "You'd also be playing a prank on Dawayne."

Flynn smiled mischievously. His eyes twinkled as he answered. "I like pranks," he said.

"And stay out!" the bouncer snarled as he threw Dawayne onto a pile of garbage bags behind the bar. Dawayne lay there for a moment, collecting his wits. For some reason the bouncer seemed to have taken offense at Dawayne's helping himself to drinks other people had left behind while they were on the dance floor. A pair of rats stared at him from the top of a garbage can. The rats sniffed the air suspiciously.

"Disgusting," he heard one of them say.

"And I thought the week old fish smelled bad," the other said.