

Believing in Brooklyn

by Matt de la Peña



“Or what if there was a wish machine on your wall?” Ray said, snatching the bag of generic-brand chips off Benny’s mattress and pushing a grubby hand inside.

Benny frowned at his friend. “What are you talking about, ‘a wish machine’?”

“Like, imagine that rig was built right into the house, B. And only kids knew how to use it. Be sick, right?”

Benny rolled his eyes and shrugged. He was over the stupid invention game Ray always wanted to play. What was the point? It wasn’t like any of Ray’s schizo ideas could actually come true.

A wish machine . . .

In somebody’s wall . . .

No wonder the guy was barely passing seventh grade.

Ray wasn’t done, though. “Wouldn’t even have buttons, man. You’d just walk up to it and—”

“Dude, could we talk about something else?” Benny interrupted.

“I’m saying, though,” Ray said. “You’d just walk up to it and whatever you thought in your head would come sliding out the slot. Like a Coke machine. Only nobody would think Coke, man, ’cause that’s lame compared to other things you could think up.”

Benny waved Ray off and snatched back the bag of chips. He poured the last

few salty crumbs onto his tongue and swallowed. “Good luck with that,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I guess you still put cookies out for Santa, too, right?”

They were both sort of laughing now, Benny play-punching Ray in the ribs and Ray fending him off.

Soon they were talking about Ray’s other favorite subject. Girls. More specifically, Sylvia Lawson, a neighborhood basketball star’s little sister. Ray had been passing notes back and forth with Sylvia every afternoon during history. According to Ray, they were now talking face-to-face a little, too. Between classes.

“Yo, she wants to meet at the movies on Sunday,” Ray said, giving himself a couple congratulatory thumps on the chest with the heel of his hand.

“Ronny know about this?” Benny said.

“Like I care.”

Benny shook his head. “Bet you start caring when he’s all up in your face. Dude’s twice your size.”

“Why’s it gotta be anybody’s business, B? We’re talking about a PG movie.”

Benny waved off his friend and peeped the clock. Almost eight.

Ray looked, too, and rolled his eyes. “I’m too grown to have some stupid curfew anymore.” Still, he zipped open his backpack and shoved his remedial math book inside and zipped it back up.

Benny stood. “Hang on a sec and I’ll walk you out.”

When he came back from the bathroom he found Ray taping a piece of notebook paper to his bedroom wall, right above the hollowed-out fireplace. “Come on, man,” Benny said, “you know my grandma trips about the wallpaper.”

“It’s just Scotch tape,” Ray said. “It barely even sticks.”

Benny stared at Ray’s stick-figure drawing of a machine. The crooked caption read: *MAGICAL WISH MACHINE*. He laughed a little and shook his head, told Ray he had emotional problems.

They walked out into the living room, both waving to Benny’s sick grandma, who was slumped into the old couch, all bones and perm, watching the news on their tiny TV.

“All right, Mrs. Garcia,” Ray said.

“Pull up them pants, Raymond,” she snapped. “At least try and look like a human being.”

She turned to Benny and Ray, coughing a little, and smiled her old lady smile. Benny watched Ray smile back, uncomfortably, and pull up his sagging jeans.

“Wait till I mention about the wallpaper,” he told Ray under his breath.

They gave a quick fist bump, then Ray was out the door and Benny went over and sat next to his grandma, even though he hated watching news.

That night Benny couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, thinking too hard. About the standardized test he'd have to take to get into a decent high school. About the Brooklyn hoop tournament he didn't sign up for this season. About Sylvia's friend Julie, who he still hadn't talked to, even though she was only three lockers down and occasionally shot him flirty looks.

But mostly Benny thought about his sick grandma, asleep in the next room. He imagined her chronic lung problem as a street gang of microscopic bugs that had crawled in through her ear one morning while she sat on the stoop sipping her sweet coffee. After a long march through his grandma's larynx and windpipe the bugs had settled in her lungs, where they continually tagged her organ lining with miniature cans of spray paint, making it impossible for her to breathe regular.

On cue, he heard his grandmother start coughing again in the next room.

What would he do if something happened to his grandma? He couldn't even think about it without feeling a hole opening in his stomach.

Benny sat up and rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock. Past

midnight. He counted how many hours until he had to be up for school. Then he pulled off his blanket and went for his Game Boy.

On his way to the closet, though, he found himself standing in front of the lopsided drawing Ray had taped above the fireplace. He grinned a little thinking how people who were crappy at one thing, like Ray with school, were supposed to be decent at something else. For Ray, though, that “something else” definitely wasn’t art.

Man, Benny thought. Was Ray good at anything? Girls maybe. But it wasn’t like you had to do anything to be good at girls, right? Some people just had it like that.

Then Benny did something out of character.

He leaned toward the schizo drawing and thought, *My wish is for earplugs I could wear at night. So no microscopic bugs could sneak in with their spray-paint cans.*

Just thinking it, though, didn’t seem official enough so Benny said it, too. “I wish for earplugs I could sleep with. Got that, Mr. Santa Claus? Earplugs.”

He cracked up at himself and grabbed the Game Boy from the closet and played his outdated war game on mute. After two or three games he paused it for a sec to rest his eyes and fell asleep sitting up.

Benny woke up the next morning with a stiff neck. He climbed out of bed bleary-eyed and dragged himself to the bathroom to shower. As he walked back into his room he spotted something odd and stopped in his tracks.

The cracked stool he kept stored in his closet was now shoved inside the fake fireplace, right beneath Ray's wish machine drawing. On top of the stool was a pair of headphones he'd never seen before.

Benny picked up the phones and looked them over. Sonys that covered the entire ear. The initials JB etched into the right side. They weren't earplugs, but they were definitely in the same ballpark. Which was really weird. He glanced at Ray's drawing, then back at the headphones, then he spun around expecting to see Ray at the door, laughing. But there was nobody.

Benny dressed and got his book bag together and went into the living room, where his grandma was cackling at something on *The Today Show*.

"Hey, Grams," he said. "Did Ray stop by when I was in the shower?"

She turned to him, frowning. "You think I'd let that little hoodlum in here unsupervised?"

"Was anybody here? Did Auntie Rosa bring groceries early?"

"Nobody was here, Benny." She covered her mouth as she coughed. "At least nobody who still walks among us."

The sicker his grandma became, the more she spoke about ghosts. Sometimes she even talked to Benny's grandpa in her room. With the door

closed. Even though he'd been gone over twenty-five years. Just a week ago he'd heard her sniffing through the door, explaining to her dead husband that she'd lost the silver chain he'd given her on their last anniversary together.

Benny considered that.

Maybe the ghost of the grandpa he'd never met was messing with him. Then Benny remembered a very important fact: he didn't believe in ghosts, or wish machines.

He held out the headphones, said, "By any chance, Grams, did you leave these in my room?"

She put on her reading glasses to see what he was holding. "Boy, you'd have to put me in a full hazmat suit to touch them feces-looking things." She slipped off her glasses and turned back to *The Today Show*.

Benny stared down at the headphones trying to figure out how they looked like feces.

On his way home from school that day, Benny ran into Ronny and Simón on Seventh Avenue. They were coming out of a bodega with their daily Twinkies and strawberry Nesquiks, and when they spotted him, Simón held out a fist and said, "B Man."

Benny tapped Simón's fist. Then Ronny's.

"Spare a little change?" a pencil-thin homeless man said, rattling the

coins in his old Styrofoam coffee cup. He was sitting on an overturned bucket outside the store, his usual spot, and he looked like death.

“Nah, old man,” Simón said.

“You don’t need change,” Ronny said, “you need a bar of soap.”

When the guys turned and started walking, Benny slipped the homeless dude a couple quarters. Like he always did. Not because Benny was some great guy. But because this skinny old beggar, for whatever reason, made him think of his grandma. And whenever he thought about his grandma, sick at home, while he was out hanging around, he felt guilty, like he owed somebody something.

They cruised Seventh Avenue, Ronny and Simón unwrapping their Twinkie packs and Benny looking more closely at the headphones around Ronny’s neck. They were Sonys. Same model as the ones he’d found in his room. Ronny’s initials weren’t JB, they were RL, but it still seemed like a crazy coincidence.

“So it’s true what I heard?” Ronny said.

“What?” Benny said.

“Your boy’s trying to talk to my sis?”

“Who, Ray?” Benny said.

“You ain’t gotta lie to kick it,” Simón said. “Sylvia’s been, like . . .

developing, man.”

Ronny looked at Simón.

Simón shrugged and sipped his strawberry milk.

“I think they’re mostly friends or whatever,” Benny said.

“He doesn’t think he’s some player ?” Ronny said.

“No way,” Benny said. “He’s too busy trying to make it out of seventh grade.”

Simón smiled a little.

Ronny didn’t.

They were all quiet for a bit as they continued walking, Benny spying the serious look on Ronny’s face. He was two years older. A freshman. Already the star power forward on John Jay’s varsity hoop squad. Benny thought how weird it was to see such a powerful-looking dude rocking a pink milk mustache.

“Yo, Sylvia’s irritating,” Ronny said. “And those bangs she got make her look like a Chihuahua.”

Simón laughed.

“But tell your boy Ray,” Ronny said, “if he messes her over I’m gonna have to stomp him out.”

“Ray won’t mess nobody over,” Benny said. “I promise.”

“Yeah?”

Benny nodded.

Simón opened a second Twinkies pack and handed one of the greasy yellow loaves to Ronny, who broke it in half. He held the shorter end out to Benny, and Benny took it.

“It’s all good,” Simón said.

Benny bit into the Twinkie just as they reached his block. They parted ways with a series of fist bumps and head nods. But when Benny was a quarter of the way down his block, Ronny called out, “Yo, you live by that boarded-up brownstone, right?”

“Yeah,” Benny said. “Why, what’s up?”

Ronny just nodded, though. Then he and Simón rounded the next corner, out of sight.

Benny walked down Second Street thinking about Ray and Sylvia and Ronny’s headphones and the initials JB. He sat on the stoop in front of his apartment, looked across the street, where Ray lived, and swallowed the last of his Twinkie half. Benny was always answering for Ray. Why was that? And what would happen if Ray messed over Sylvia now? Would Ronny come looking for him, too?

He turned to the condemned brownstone next door. The one Ronny

had just mentioned. Tags everywhere, boarded windows, signs warning, Keep Out. He imagined this was what his grandma's lungs would look like if they were an apartment building in Brooklyn. His own lungs hurt just thinking about it. He fell into thinking about her again. What if she got worse? What if one morning she never woke up? And Benny peeked into her room and found her there. No longer breathing.

He looked up when he heard a group of girls from the private school approaching. They stopped talking as they passed Benny and then giggled farther down the street. One girl had on a Santa hat even though it was March. She looked back for a half second and caught Benny's eyes, then continued on with her friends.

Something weird was going down, Benny thought. And it all centered around the mysterious pair of headphones.

Before bed that night, Benny sat with his grandma watching some ancient movie on TCM. He hated old flicks, but his grandma seemed mesmerized by every boring conversation. At least Auntie Rosa had come by with groceries, so there was mint-chip ice cream.

"Hey, Grams," Benny said, setting down his empty bowl.

"Hey what?"

"You know the building next door?"

“Of course I know the building next door, Benny. I’ve lived here my whole life.” She coughed into a closed fist.

“I was just wondering, though,” Benny said. “Who owns it?”

She gave a dramatic sigh and made a big production out of picking up the remote and turning down the volume. “Some silly old Polish lady. Five feet nothing with a hairy mole on her chin. Lives in a trashy studio in Greenpoint with a hundred cats. Refuses to sell the building next door because she hates her ex-husband, who’s a racist pill popper. What else you wanna know, huh, Benny?”

Benny chuckled some and looked away. He never knew if his grandma was being serious or playing him. After a few seconds he said, “How much you think it’s worth? Like millions?”

“Boy, what do I care?” she said. “None of that money’s gonna end up in my bank account.”

Benny smiled.

His grandma coughed.

“Okay, let’s say you were given all the money in the world, Grams. What’s the first thing you’d go buy yourself?”

His grandma stared at his forehead, like she was genuinely thinking about it, which surprised him. “I wouldn’t buy nothing,” she finally said. “But I might hire detectives to help me find something I lost.”

“What’d you lose?” he said, knowing she meant the silver necklace from his

grandfather.

She smiled at Benny and patted his knee.

Benny waited for her to answer, but she never did. Eventually she aimed the remote at the TV and turned the volume back up.

Just before three in the morning, Benny awoke from a nightmare.

He flung off his covers and sat up. As he looked into the darkness, pieces of his dream slowly came back to him. . . .

He was in Coney Island with his grandma, where he'd talked her into going on the Ferris wheel. When they made it to the very top, though, she stopped breathing. He screamed for help but the Ferris wheel was stuck. She clutched at her throat, her face turning blue, and all he could do was cry, like some stupid little kid, and beg for his grandma's forgiveness. Because deep down he knew something no one else did. It was his fault. He was the reason his grandma was dying. She'd already raised her own kids. Three of them. But instead of getting to relax in her old age, like most people, she had to watch Benny.

Benny turned on a light and found himself, once again, standing in front of Ray's stupid drawing. He wondered if it was a bad idea to wish something about saving his grandma's life. Since he didn't actually believe in wishes, what if it worked the opposite and his grandma stopped breathing, like in his dream? They'd put him in a foster home. Far away from Brooklyn. And he'd

have nobody. Not even illiterate Ray.

Benny decided to wish for something simple first. Like a test. He leaned toward the half-crumpled drawing and said, “I wish for a pizza from Pino’s. Not no single slice, either, Mr. Santa. A whole pie, steaming hot out the oven.”

His grandmother coughed again in the next room.

Benny shut off his light and climbed back into bed.

First thing he did when the alarm went off was check the stool in the fireplace. He looked around the room, thinking maybe his pizza wish had morphed into something slightly different, the way his first one had gone from earplugs to headphones. But there was nothing.

He shrugged and climbed off his mattress.

When he came back from his shower, he checked again. All around the room. Still nothing close to pizza. He got together his book bag, went to the kitchen, and made his grandma’s green tea, put her medicine on a small plate, and set everything on the table in front of her. She was coughing nonstop, though, and didn’t even look up at him.

“Hey, Grams,” he said, “you all right?”

She waved him away, saying between coughs, “Just go to school, Benny.”

He stood there, staring at her. Maybe his dream had been trying to tell

him something. That she was getting worse. That she maybe needed an ambulance, and he shouldn't leave her.

He was about to put his bag down and call 911, but right that second she looked up and barked, "Benny. Go to school, I said. Now!"

Sylvia sneaked up on Benny's blind side at the start of lunch period, pinched his side. "So I heard you talked to my bro yesterday," she said.

Julie was a few steps behind, texting somebody on her pink phone.

"For a minute," Benny said. He pulled a textbook from his open locker, slipped it into his bag.

"Yeah, well"—she patted his arm—"whatever you said, he seems cooler about me and Ray."

Benny nodded and shut his locker.

"I'm still thinking of a way to repay you."

"You don't need to repay me," Benny said.

"Nah, I always take care of people who take care of me."

Julie put away her phone and tugged Sylvia's shirtsleeve. "Come on, Syl. Let's go get Pino's already. I'm starving."

"Okay, okay." Sylvia turned back to Benny, said, "I think Ronny actually trusts you."

"It's his face," Julie said. "Benny's got that kind of face you just believe."

"Maybe," Sylvia said.

Benny felt his believable face going red and he waved them off, said, “I don’t know about all that.”

“It’s true,” Julie said, smiling. “I’d trust you.” Then she tugged on Sylvia’s sleeve again and they both waved and started toward the campus exit.

Benny knew he should have some cool parting line right here, something funny, but he couldn’t think. He had to settle for watching Julie walk away.

After school, Ray and Benny stopped by the bodega for candy. Ray paid, which Benny figured was Ray’s way of saying thanks without saying thanks.

Outside, the skinny homeless man on the bucket rattled his coins and said the only three words he seemed to know: “Spare some change?”

Ray walked right by, but Benny dropped in a couple more quarters.

As they cruised Seventh Avenue, Ray told him, “You know that goes right to dude’s beer fund, right?”

Benny shrugged. “I also know it’s a free country.”

They stopped at the corner of Second Street. Ray was going to go play ball, but Benny had to get back to his grandma. Before they parted ways, Ray took another shot at his invention game: “Or what if there was a computer that could do homework, B. Like you’d just stick the assignment in and it’d print out all the work in like ten seconds. Then

people could go to the movies with their girl and still pass school.”

Benny shook his head, told Ray, “You seriously need to read a book.”

Ray waved him off.

“By the way,” Benny said, “you know Julie?”

“Yeah, you’re digging on her, right?”

“No—I mean, I don’t know. I just wondered if you knew her last name.”

A smile went on Ray’s face. “Bauer. Why, you gonna go stalk her now?”

“Julie Bauer,” Benny said. “Her initials are JB.”

“Way to go, B. I guess reading books really does make you smart.”

Benny decided not to mention the headphones and how “JB” had been etched into the right side. He still thought Ray might have something to do with it.

“Yo, you should wish for a date with her,” Ray said. “On the machine I drew you. I can pretty much guarantee it’ll come true.”

Benny stared at him for a sec. “Wait, what are you talking about?”

“I’m saying,” Ray said, “that thing’s got magical powers. And Julie’s the perfect wish.” He started laughing and pointed at his own temple

and then turned and jogged off.

Benny's grandma wasn't on the couch when he got home. She was in her room, sleeping. He tiptoed into his own room and found something shocking. A large Pino's pizza box sitting on his cracked stool. He couldn't believe it. He popped open the box, found a mix of slices. Pepperoni and plain and mushroom and garden-style and even his all-time favorite, Hawaiian. They weren't steaming hot out of the oven—in fact, they looked a day old—but that didn't stop his stomach from growling. Plus, his first wish came slightly different from what he said, too.

Benny closed the box without eating any pizza and sat there for a couple minutes, thinking. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. But what exactly was happening? He didn't know.

He got up and opened the closet door, looking for clues. He lifted his mattress. Peeked up into the hollow fireplace. Opened the window and looked up and down the fire escape. He walked down the hall toward his grandma's room, calling out, "Hey, Grams! You put that pizza in—" He cut himself short when he remembered she was in bed, asleep.

He walked quietly back into his room, remembering how Julie and Sylvia had gone to Pino's for lunch. How Sylvia had promised to pay him back. Then there was Ray bringing up his wish machine picture after school. That grin on his face when he said Benny should wish for a date with Julie. Julie Bauer. JB.

Letters that made him think of Ronny's headphones and how Ronny had wanted to confirm that Benny lived by the condemned brownstone. The private school girl in the Santa cap even came to mind. The way she'd turned around and looked at him.

Somebody was playing him.

Benny opened the pizza box again. Looked a little too old to actually eat, though, so he closed it back up.

He imagined if there was a hidden camera somewhere in his room. And people all over the internet were sitting with their bowls of popcorn, watching him. Laughing at him.

Benny spent the next two days trying to make sense of the headphones and pizza. He stopped making wishes because there was a tiny part of him that actually wanted to believe, and the fact that he had even one gullible bone in his body freaked him out.

Still, he'd stare at the ridiculous picture for hours, running through different wish possibilities.

At first he was convinced it was Ray. Who else knew Benny taped his spare key to the bottom of the potted plant on the fire escape out back? Things were heating up with Ray and Sylvia. Ronny had even invited Ray to play pickup with him and his boys. This had to be another example of Ray thanking Benny without actually thanking him.

But on the flip side, how would Ray have known what Benny wished for? It wasn't like he'd planted a microphone somewhere. Benny had scoured his bedroom, the entire apartment. And Ray seemed genuinely clueless when Benny thanked him for the pizza at school. "What pizza?" he'd answered.

"The whole pizza in my room."

"Yo, you got pizza at the house, B? Let's go handle that!"

Even if Ray wasn't directly responsible for the pizza or headphones, he had to have at least told somebody about the spare key.

That led Benny to Sylvia and Julie. They'd gone to Pino's the day he found the pizza in his room. And Sylvia had promised to "repay" him for talking to Ronny. And what about Julie's initials? Wasn't it too much of a coincidence to have those same letters, JB, etched into the headphones sitting on his desk? Maybe they tricked remedial Ray into telling them about the spare key.

Another possibility, though, was Auntie Rosa, who came by with groceries twice a week. She and his grandma hardly talked anymore, and she only stopped by while Benny was at school, but she was consistently inside the apartment. And she'd always liked Benny. Probably because she didn't have kids of her own. Maybe this was her way of saying she'd take Benny in if anything happened with his grandma.

He considered each and every one of these possibilities. But in the end, he always looped back to the same person. His grandma. She was in the house all day. And even though she was tough on Benny to his face, he knew she loved

him. This was probably her way of doing something nice for him without getting all mushy about it. Which she hated. At the same time, it worried Benny, too. Because if she was doing something nice, maybe she knew she was coming to the end of her life. Maybe this was her way of saying good-bye.

He tried to put that last part out of his head.

There were still questions. Like how did his grandma hear through the wall? Her outdated hearing aids barely worked when Benny was sitting right next to her. And how'd she pull all this off in a walker? These days it took her like half an hour to even get up the block. There were definitely things that gave Benny pause, but his gut told him it had to be his grandma.

On Thursday night Benny decided to make a special wish.

After he and his grandma watched another boring old movie together, about some big-eared dude trapped on an island during some war, Benny washed up like normal and went to his room and closed the door. He waited until he heard the faint sounds of coughing in the next room, then he positioned himself in front of Ray's wish machine picture.

But instead of leaning toward the drawing this time, he turned toward the wall he shared with his grandma. "Here goes another wish, Mr. Santa," he called out in a louder voice. "I wish for a beautiful silver necklace. To replace the anniversary one my grandma lost from her

husband. My grandpa.”

Benny put his ear to the wall and listened.

He couldn't hear much, but he could imagine in his head. His grandma's eyes all bugged as she lay in bed trying to process Benny's latest wish. Which was really her wish.

The next morning Benny's stool was empty. But he was hip to his grandma's game now. A special wish like a silver necklace would need more time.

He showered and fixed his grandma's green tea and set her pills on a plate and put everything on the table in front of her. Then he ate his cereal at the kitchen table, watching her on the couch. She was coughing even more than usual. And she wasn't watching *The Today Show* or reading one of her mystery books. She was just sitting there, staring at nothing.

“You all right, Grams?” he said.

She waved him off and coughed some more.

“Need me to stay home?” he said. “I could take you to the doctor or something.”

“You're going to school!” she barked. “Won't be no ignorant kid running around under my roof!”

He finished the rest of his cereal trying to decide if he should stay home to make sure she didn't go searching for the necklace. Because this was the sickest he'd ever seen her. She couldn't even sit up straight. There was no way

she'd survive outside alone.

When he went over to her, though, all she did was shoo him out the door.

Benny couldn't concentrate at school.

He listened to his teachers lecture, but nothing stuck. He kept imagining his wheezing grandma walkering herself down Seventh Avenue, coughing nonstop, barely looking before crossing streets.

"You all right?" Ray asked him after history.

"Yeah," Benny said.

"You seem out of it." Ray unwrapped a piece of gum and popped it into his mouth. He offered one to Benny, but Benny shook him off.

"Anyways," Ray said. "You know your wish from last night?"

Benny stared at Ray, hoping the next thing he said would clear everything up.

"I'm not supposed to say anything, but it's gonna come true."

"What are you talking about?" Benny said.

"Your wish, B."

Benny was about to press further, but right then Sylvia came up to them and pulled Ray away. They were both giggling like they knew something he didn't.

“What’s going on?” Benny called after Ray.

Sylvia was the one who looked back. She made a zipper motion across her lips like neither of them would say a thing.

Benny was sure it was Sylvia and Ray granting his wishes, until Julie caught up with him after school.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he said back, hoping she was about to tell him everything.

“Why you in such a hurry?”

“Nah,” Benny said. “I just gotta take my grandma to this appointment.”

“Oh,” she said. “Then I’ll just say this real quick. Me and Sylvia were talking last night. And we wanted to know. Or, more like I wanted to know.” Julie seemed suddenly nervous as she searched for the right words.

“It’s about my wish machine, right?” Benny said, trying to help out.

Julie got a confused look on her face. “What wish machine?”

Benny scanned her face for a grin. “You really don’t know?”

“Um, should I?”

Benny stopped walking. “Your initials are JB, right?”

Julie stopped, too. “Yeah. So?”

“Did you put your initials on a pair of Sony headphones?”

“What?” Julie scoffed. “Who puts their initials on headphones? Besides, I only have the earbuds that came with my iPod.”

Benny looked at the ground, more confused than ever.

“Why are you so weird?” Julie said.

“What were you gonna say then?”

Julie shook her head and told him. “I was just gonna see if you wanted to go to the movies on Sunday. With Ray and Sylvia.”

“Oh,” Benny said. He felt like the biggest idiot in Brooklyn.

“So, do you?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“Totally. I just thought you were saying something else.”

She shook her head, told him, “You’re really weird, you know that?”

Benny didn’t say anything. He knew it was all awkward now, but he was too confused to try and smooth things over.

“Anyways,” Julie said. “Sylvia will tell Ray what time, and he can tell you. Now go take care of your grandma. Weirdo.”

* * *

As Benny walked home he realized Ray had been talking about Julie earlier. The guy knew nothing about the replacement necklace. Which left his grandma again. Who was too sick to go outside. What if his stupid wish had backfired and put his grandma in danger? He picked up his pace a bit, a

terrible feeling growing in the pit of his stomach.

When he got to Second Street he saw two cop cars halfway down his block and his entire body went numb. Then he saw the ambulance. And the fire truck. Lights flashing without sound. The street was blocked off near his apartment.

Benny threw off his book bag and started sprinting.

He tried to run right through the wall of cops standing in front of his gate, but two of them wrapped him up, saying, "Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

"What happened to my grandma?" Benny shouted.

"Slow down, son," one of the cops said.

"What's your name?" another said.

But right then Benny saw the stretcher being wheeled out of his building. He crumbled to his knees, shouting, "No! Please!"

He covered his face with his hands. Looked up at the stretcher again and shouted, "Grandma!"

One of the cops put a hand on Benny's shoulder and said, "It's gonna be okay, son."

Benny looked up at the man but couldn't see his face. That's when he realized he was crying. And he was on the ground.

"What's your name, son?" another cop said.

"That's my grandma," was all Benny could say back. "That's my grandma."

He wanted to tell them it was all his fault, too. She was too old to have to watch some stupid kid like him. But the words wouldn't form.

The paramedics carried the stretcher carefully down the stairs and then flipped down the wheels and began rolling it out of the gate, toward the waiting ambulance.

Benny wiped his eyes and stood, preparing himself to see his grandma. He prayed she was just sick. Or hurt. Not dead. Not gone forever. Then the stretcher was in front of him and it was his grandma and there was an oxygen mask strapped over her face.

His chest felt like a bottle of shook-up soda. Like any second it would explode right there on the sidewalk. And they'd have to put him on a stretcher, too.

"I'm sorry, Grams!" he shouted.

His grandma moved her eyes to look at him but that was it.

Then she was past him.

"Is she gonna live?" Benny said, turning to the cop.

"Yes, she is," the cop said. "Thanks to that man." He pointed up to the stoop, where a man was being led out of Benny's building in handcuffs. After a few seconds Benny realized who it was. The homeless guy who always sat on a bucket outside the bodega and begged for change.

What was happening? Why was he coming out of Benny's place? And in handcuffs?

The homeless man looked right in Benny's eyes as a female cop moved him toward one of the squad cars. "I only wanted you to believe," he said, and then he lowered his eyes, like he was ashamed.

When they got to the squad car, the female cop guided the homeless man into the backseat and slammed shut the door.

"Did he hurt her?" Benny said, making a move toward the squad car with clenched fists.

But the cop held him back. "You got it wrong, son. That man saved your grandmother's life."

Benny looked at the cop, confused.

The cop motioned toward the condemned building next door, where three firemen were sawing through the padlock on the front grate. "Yes, he broke into your apartment, Benny. But when he found your grandmother passed out on the couch he called nine-one-one on your phone. And paramedics got here immediately."

Benny's eyes went wide as he processed what he was being told. "So why's he being arrested?"

Static sounded over the cop's radio. He held it to his mouth and gave the address of Benny's apartment building and then turned back to Benny and said, "What's your name, son?"

"Benny."

"Okay, Benny. We need to take him in for questioning. We found a gold

chain in his possession that we believe was your grandmother's."

That's when it hit Benny.

The wish machine.

The hollow fireplace.

Gold instead of silver, 'cause it was never exactly what he said.

"What's the man's name?" Benny asked.

"Mr. James Burrell. He's already admitted to squatting in the building next door for the past few weeks. We believe he broke into your apartment through a connecting fireplace in one of the bedrooms."

Benny couldn't believe it. He wiped his face on his shirtsleeve and told the officer, "He wasn't stealing the chain, mister. I think he was bringing it to us."

Now it was the cop's turn to look confused.

"My grandma lost her necklace," Benny explained. "Awhile ago. And then last night I wished for it. And he was making my wish come true. Even though it was supposed to be silver like the one she lost. But that's exactly how it was with the earplugs and the pizza, too."

"Pizza?" the cop said. "You're losing me, Benny."

The cop jotted something down in his notebook and then looked at Benny, waiting for more.

But Benny was thinking about something else now. Because he'd made those wishes on Ray's stupid wish machine drawing, the homeless man had come into the apartment and found his grandma and saved her life. All

because he had believed. He never would have thought of that.

“Benny?” the cop said.

The firemen were now entering the condemned building, pointing their high-powered flashlights.

The ambulance with his grandma sped away.

Benny took a deep breath, and prepared himself to explain it all, starting with Ray’s drawing.