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Title: Wish Catcher

Wish-Catcher
By Nan Wu

There is a mailbox, white and plain, on the corner of Westtier and Solderman. It is among the bushes, those Ocean Spray bushes that sprout wisp-like between the brick wall of the small port offices and the gravel path. But sometimes, you see that box, out of the corner of your eye—there and gone the moment you notice it. Just a flash of polished white lacquer among the flimsy white flowers.

You can see it on a foggy morning, that ghost-box, but whenever you try to get close, it fades and falls away like it's made of fog itself. When you were still in single digits, you heard about it from the older kids. They boast, brag and talk, but you know it's not true. They could never find it. You will.

Find a feather. The most beautiful one you can. The brightest blue, the deepest red. If a neighbor is about to serve up their early-morning rooster with potatoes, drop in with a friendly smile and some of your mother's homemade pie. Don't forget to mention what it would mean to you to possess some of their bird's tail feathers.

Go to the general store and buy some ink and a piece of the most perfect, milk-white smooth paper you can find. Trim the feather and print in your very best script: *For the Wish-Catcher*. Take your paper and your feather and keep them safe. And wait.

Wait for the fog—it can't be seen otherwise. Slip out early in the morning—four is ideal. Put on your warmest clothes and bring the paper, the feather, ink and a spare handkerchief.

Walk softly in the fog. It is like a dense carpet that muffles your footsteps. A dog starts to bark. You want to tell it to be quiet, but you say not a word. The fog is like a library, keeping all the wishes trapped in it, and you want to be respectful, so you keep your voice down. You are almost at the corner of Westtier and Solderman. You stop now and tie the handkerchief over your eyes. The mailbox is like the fog. You can't see it, but you know that it's there.

You can't find it by looking or feeling. You just know.

So you walk slowly forward, shuffling your feet on the road to keep from tripping. You reach those Ocean Spray bushes and you hold your paper and find that mailbox in your mind. You turn the paper sideways and slide it in.

Now you can remove the handkerchief. You open your eyes and look around. You look for the mailbox, but you can't see it. You look down at the ground for your paper, but that's gone too.

You wait, then.

Wait again.

Wait some more, and more, and more.

You wait for that whispery voice to ask you, as you walked to school one misty morning, what you most desire. And you might not want to say it, but there's no harm in telling a ghost. They don't exist.

So you say it, you whisper your secret to the wind and let it carry your wishes away.

You never really know when your wishes go away. It's a weight that you've had for so long; you can't tell that it's gone when it goes little by little.

After a while, you'll realize that they really are gone. And after a while longer, you'll want them back again. The weight, your anchor.

So you get out your feather, ink, and go buy another piece of paper. This time you print:
From the Wish-Catcher.

You wait for the fog and find that mailbox again.

And as before, you wait.

And wait.

And when you're tired of waiting, you wait some more.

Then in the fog, you hear a whispery laugh. And you notice something hollow and empty in yourself. It bothers you, but slowly, it goes away, fills up. The Wish-Catcher has given them back.

He didn't grant your wishes. He simply kept them, as pristine and fresh as when you gave them up.

The Custodian of Wishes.

You aren't mad at him. You are ready to have them again.

And you say, "Thank you."

Just "Thank you," to that Wish-Catcher that took your burden for you when it got too heavy.

But the next time you go looking for that mailbox, it won't be there anymore. You don't look for it again, because you won't find it. He's left. The Wish-Catcher will be waiting for someone else.