

The Wrapper

Jennifer Ariadne Park

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Once upon a time there was a roll of wrapper. It was the most beautiful, proudest, and most prized product to ever come out of the great paper magnates of the Pacific Northwest. Its inventors, a team of engineers from many different companies, started with the smoothest, sturdiest paper base made from the finest wood pulp of the finest farm-raised organic firs. Using the most advanced technology available, they deposited a thin film of rare minerals, carefully oxidized with exotic gases to bring out the most mysterious golden tone people have ever set their eyes on, vaguely suggestive of all the majestic colors of a sunrise, and yet shining with the subtle gentleness of a sunset. They then coated the paper with the most durable and flexible polymer film that magically grew itself out of a brown sludge and formed the most translucent, iridescent base coat, soaking through the metal and paper layers to form a solid, yet flexible layer. Not to take any chances, they laid a sparse layer of silicone fibers for glimpses of flashy shines, and sprinkled generously with pearlescent powder made from the scales of the fish that swam in the deeper trenches of the Great Ocean. The fibers and scales produced a feeling of being immersed in the Great Ocean, looking up at the blue sky through the water, and pondering the mysteries of life and light that danced on the surface as the waves shifted and bounced rhythmically and randomly. Flecks of mica were added just to overdo it a little, and the whole bit was coated again with a layer of weather- and chemical-resistant film, which toned down the mica flecks but gave yet another level of mystery to all the other layers of beauty and colors. The resulting wrapper, to the great pleasure of its inventors, was difficult to tear but easy to cut with scissors, almost melting under the gliding blades, hardly requiring the shearing motion of the hand. Because they weren't thinking at all about the "usability" of the wrapper until someone at the unveiling meeting with the marketing department, probably someone from the marketing department, brought it up—they were only concerned with beauty and somewhat and reluctantly with durability—the inventors were very, very surprised to see just how usable their roll of prototype turned out to be, proven before the watchful eyes of the skeptical marketers and advertisers, who then broke into an avalanche of cheers and applause. The head of the marketing department held the cut piece of wrapper in her shaking hands without a single word, and had to hand it to the person to her right before breaking into joyous tears. Never before had the cold, calculating, yet passionate hearts of the marketers been moved so much by a product. They had found what they were looking for for a long, long time, a product that they truly, absolutely, believed in.

The wrapper's life was now out of the engineers' hands and in the hands of the sales force of the great paper magnates. They worked day and night producing blurbs, press releases, advertising copies, portable displays, pie charts, and exhibit layouts. They put together a team of beautiful, intelligent, and stylish expert-models who would introduce the wrapper at the trade shows and press conferences. They even prepared a bus for the sales team's travels to the trade shows and

door-to-door visits with potential buyers, from coast to coast. And off they went with the roll of wrapper, carefully laid in an unmarked cardboard poster mailer—another one of their proudest products.

The wrapper was unveiled at the hugely massive International Novelty, Greeting Cards, and Wrapping Sundries Show (INGCWSS, or “Inks”) in Las Vegas. At the Inks, there were coughing cards to cheer up an ailing friend, and barking sleigh bells to hang from a Christmas bow. There were toys that could be assembled from a gift box, and neckties that could be fashioned into party hats. There was even a company that could imprint on anything with a flat surface a moving portrait of a person in 3-D hologram, speaking holiday greetings and introducing the latest in products and services no one should live without—the sales rep was heard sheepishly admitting that, yes, they had tried to make a Menorah do the taking and greeting. Most importantly, there were millions of yards of golden, iridescent, shiny, sparkly, pearlescent, and/or tear-resistant ribbons, draperies, and, of course, wrappers, sitting, standing, and clamoring for attention. And of all these yards of golden beauties that flooded the Inks, our hero the wrapper stood out, without any contest, and grabbed everyone’s attention, even of those who only caught a passing glimpse on their way to the bathroom. Everyone exclaimed. Everyone stopped breathing. Many, many soulless, calculating, but passionate buyers failed to stop their uncontrollable weeping—some even hugged the members of the sales team in gratefulness. Even some of the competitors came to gasp and sigh and weep, and also occasionally hugged the sales people in warm camaraderie and congratulations.

After a long night of celebration in the hotel lobby, the team and the wrapper moved on to the simply-named Bridal Show (BS) in Chicago. The trip was long and tiring, and it broke everyone’s travel-worn hearts to arrive at the BS, what with the satins and the silks and the golds and the pearls marching into the exhibit hall in their finest and the most glamorous. Even the most humble, old-fashioned silk-flower baby breath bouquets seemed so much more pulled together and out of this world than our friends from the Pacific Northwest. This was the nut they had to crack. This was where true glory was. This was their destiny.

After a brief, to-the-point pep talk from the sales department head—of the you-know-what-to-do-guys variety—the sales team marched into their respective restrooms, and scrubbed and washed and rubbed and soaped and dried and powdered and brushed and painted from head to toe. The wrapper could hardly recognize them when they re-emerged in their finest garments. One by one the sales team gave the wrapper a kiss to renew their own passion for their proudest, most prized product, and a team of seamsters gave the wrapper a trim to renew its beauty and shine, and they marched together, the wrapper firmly yet gently held in the department head’s diamond-ring-encrusted fingers, into the exhibit hall.

The BS was full of wonders. The newest blend of silk, rayon, and spandex fluttered in a breeze coming from a cleverly disguised set of seven custom-made silent brushless DC fans. The ribbon threaded with silver and gold, hung from a 20-foot-tall halogen-filled light stick, was proud in the fact that it was the cheapest such product ever to be produced, and yet radiated its smooth,

patent-pending glow that reminded one of the mystiques of an ancient silver urn, the simmering yet authoritative shine of which could not be duplicated by modern technology, until now. The magical warmth of the beads made from pearls, painstakingly made by oysters that were fed a new mixture of nutrients that gave the beads the musty, warm air of the tropics and shivering sharpness of the arctic... it was something that only an eyewitness could know to be indescribable.

And it was amongst these wonders that the wrapper stood, spread across the PVC-and-cardboard display board, with nothing but the cruel fluorescent lights of the exhibit hall to illuminate it, flanked by the polished but somewhat ordinary Northwestern beauty of the finest sales team the paper magnates could muster, somewhat intimidated and made insecure by the extraordinary beauty around them, but psyched up, earnest, and certain of their success. And successful they were. Despite all the glamour and luster and celebrity-only-please exclusiveness of the BS, the wrapper stood out amongst the silks and golds and silvers and shines and sparkles, for it had the mystery and beauty and shyness and glamour and hope and future and fidelity and energy and all the other qualities that were supposed to be associated with being the bride, being at the sacrament of matrimony, being loved, being beautiful, and, most importantly, being marketable.

One by one, the people of the BS dropped their snobby, competitive attitudes to marvel at the beauty of the wrapper. For once, finally, after all these years, here was a product that embodied all that the BS stood for—or had claimed to stand for. The wrapper was something that brought together all the silks, the ribbons, and the pearls, and gave them a shared purpose... or rather, reminded and recommitted them to their purpose of bringing beauty and joy. The whole conference became a celebration of this sharedness, and the organizers and sponsors and exhibitors walked in and out of the exhibit hall stunned, incredulous, and deliriously happy.

After the huge success at the BS, the rest of the sales travels were anti-climactic, and almost too easy, almost too uneventful. The euphoria of the BS gradually dissipated as conference after trade show ended, sales visits were made, and fatigue and boredom from the seemingly endless travels set into each salesperson's deepest marrows. Everyone was relieved to return home to the Northwest, see their families again, and wait for the sales calls to roll in.

The wrapper, whose whole life so far had been nothing but glamour and celebration, was especially relieved for it to be over, but also felt strangely empty. It seemed there was only one thing it had to do in its life, and it was all over now. Despite the protection of the finest poster mailer in the whole world, the wrapper had become wrinkled here and there. Its middle had begun to lose its metallic luster from being exposed to the nervous sweat of the department head day after day after day. Although it received careful trimming before each exhibit, the last exhibit was the most grueling one in terms of schedule, and no one gave the wrapper a trim at the end of the show. The salespeople were an elite corps of experienced travelers. They made the same circuit every time, year after year, and had not only developed an elaborate ritual that brought them back to "normal" life back at home, but they were also selected over the years for their ability to turn around from a long trip and show up for work the next day without a hair misplaced. The wrapper, on the other hand,

was not only inexperienced, but was also sure that it wasn't really destined to be a tireless saleswrapper. It was tired and felt ashamed about being tired. All the things that it said during the trip and were said to it during the trip were swimming around in its head, and it started to mull over them, sentence after sentence, wondering what they meant, wondering what it should have said, wondering what else could have happened if ...

In short, the wrapper was very self-conscious, and was only beginning to realize this after the whole sales trip was done with. After days of mulling things over, self-consciousness shifted to shame and embarrassment. Soon, the wrapper was locked up in its apartment, depressed, unable to face the world, and feeling desperately empty.

The wrapper stopped eating. Not that wrappers ever ate; the wrapper simply decided, resolutely, that it wouldn't eat any more.

The wrapper stopped sleeping. Not that wrappers ever slept; the wrapper simply decided, resolutely, that it wouldn't sleep any more.

The wrapper stopped singing or dancing. Not that wrappers ever sang or danced; the wrapper simply decided, resolutely, that it wouldn't sing or dance any more.

The wrapper stopped going to movies. The wrapper stopped hanging out at crowded cafés, watching people go by. The wrapper stopped calling up friends and talking into the night. The wrapper stopped going to the grocery store to check out the latest shipment of fresh exotic fruits. The wrapper stopped gazing out the window, watching the maple and elm leaves turn color and yield the stage to the glorious, majestic evergreens. The wrapper stopped looking for the perfect faucet at the home improvement superstores.

One thing that the wrapper still did was going to parties. Instead of mingling and, heaven forbid, dancing, of course, the wrapper sat in the couch in a corner, along with a roll of aluminum foil and a roll of plastic wrap—they seemed to come to all the same parties—and sulked. The aluminum foil and the plastic wrap seemed to have lots in common, and talked endlessly about food, food, and nothing but food. Not being interested in food—being water-resistant but not water-proof, and having resolutely decided against eating—the wrapper had nothing to say, and didn't want to hear about food, but in the couch, in the corner, it sat, party after party, sulking, and resolutely not conversing.

Another thing that the wrapper did occasionally was to take a stroll around the neighborhood. This it actually enjoyed a great deal. It helped that the streets were full of depressed, desperately empty people who didn't eat, sleep, or mingle at parties. Not only that, most of these people didn't know this, and went about the streets seemingly happily eating, sleeping, and mingling. The wrapper fancied it could see through the people's depressed, empty hearts, and it made it feel a little better to know that it wasn't alone... as in, wasn't the only one; it was indeed alone and alone by choice.

On one of these strolls one day, the wrapper noticed a little stone on the sidewalk. The stone had never been there before as far as the wrapper remembered, and the stone looked especially out

of place for some strange reason.

Against its better judgment, the wrapper struck up a conversation, “Hi, there, stone.”

“Oh, hi... uh...,” the stone hesitated. “Hi. Um...”

The wrapper blinked inquiringly.

“So, what are you?” asked the stone, finally.

“I’m a wrapper,” the wrapper replied, taken aback.

“Are you? Oh, so you are. Well, hmmm... well, you see, you don’t look like any of the other wrappers I’ve known.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah... um...” The stone blushed the blush of someone who had said something offensive; or something perhaps not intrinsically offensive, but offensive to people of certain persuasions, or at least to certain individuals belonging to such persuasions, or, in the infinitesimally smallest bit possible, to this particular individual it was facing. It blushed again. “Well, it’s... just that I’ve seen lots of wrappers in my life, and they are, you know, wrapped around things. I...” It blushed again, knowing that it was about to say something even more offensive. “I... the only... well, I guess I haven’t met that many wrappers... personally.”

“What do you mean wrapped around things? I’m wrapped around something, ain’t I? I’m wrapped around this cardboard core, you see.” Hoping to put the embarrassed stone at ease, and hoping to put its own slightly disturbed heart at ease, the wrapper leaned forward to show the cardboard core to the stone. Indeed, the wrapper was wrapped around a cardboard core. Nothing special; just your ordinary, durable cardboard core of the kind on which wrappers are generally transported around... although, of course, the wrapper knew this was the finest, most durable core of its kind ever produced. It just didn’t make anything of it. Just to demonstrate that it was, in fact, wrapped around something.

“Yes, yes, ... I see that. That is a fine cardboard core...” The stone clammed up, hoping to stop himself from continuing.

“But ... ?” The wrapper guessed this was the word the stone tried to stop.

“Ah, see, but, see, I’ve seen toilet papers wrapped around cardboard cores like that. I’ve seen paper towels. I’ve seen fish paper. You see, being wrapped around cardboard core doesn’t make you a wrapper. You have to be... wrapped around ... um ... *things*.”

“Things?”

“Um... yes, things. You know, gifts. Boxes. That kind of stuff.”

“Things?”

“Um...” The stone decided it was best not to push the point.

“THINGS...” The wrapper fell deep into thought.

“Well, anyway, I mean, that, I suppose, doesn’t make you *not* a wrapper... What do I know, you know. I’m just a rock. I’m not even really a thing... I’m really nobody, you know?”

“...” The wrapper didn’t respond. It remained still and silent.

The stone waited a minute or so for any reaction, but didn’t see any movement whatsoever.

Thoroughly mortified, its only wish was to be able to just walk away, which was granted when the stone decided finally it could just walk away. “Well, um... see you around then.” It walked away.

The wrapper remained in the spot. Its conscious mind, indeed its entire soul, was boiling with a thousand and million thoughts, none of which pleased it. Things. Things. Things. Wrappers wrap things. Wrappers are wrapped around things. Wrappers are for wrapping. Wrapping. Wrapping. On things. Boxes. Gifts. Boxes. Gifts. Boxes. Gifts.

Everything made sense, but none of it made sense. The wrapper had always known that its purpose was to be wrapped around things. That’s what they made it for. That’s what they were touting it for in front of all those potential buyers at trade shows after trade shows and sales calls after sales calls. Excellent wrapper. The wrapper was a beautiful thing to wrap around things. It made other things beautiful. That’s what it did.

However, never in its life had the wrapper been wrapped around anything. Other than having a piece of it cut off to show how functional it was—during that very first meeting with the sales department—to show how it was as functional as a wrapper as it was beautiful to behold, the wrapper had never been anywhere near a thing, a gift, a box for it to be wrapped around. It had just simply never happened.

And, it seemed, it might simply never happen. Ever.

Ever.

Things. Gifts. Boxes.

The wrapper, it seemed, was destined to never be wrapped around anything.

Ever.

If what the wrapper felt before its encounter with the stone was something of a depression from lack of purpose, the wrapper now felt something altogether different, even more of a total void in its soul, even more of a total negation of its being, even more of a total denial of its existence. Before, it was bored, sulky, anti-climactic. Now it was ... nowhere.

Literally, at least in its mind.

Literally.

The wrapper stood on the same spot for hours, as people passed by without noticing its newfound bad mood. Occasionally, a person walked by who commented to oneself on the wrapper’s unusual beauty and/or unnerving stillness, but the wrapper didn’t take notice of any of that.

As the sun set and the passing automobiles started to ratchet up their headlights for safety, the wrapper slowly came to, and began walking home. Thinking and feeling profound nothingness.

One question slowly percolated up the wrapper’s soul. It formed itself of all the nebulous thoughts and questions and revelations that swirled around within, and posed itself carefully, deliberately, and purposefully.

Its impact was so strong that the wrapper had to pause again in the middle of getting ready for yet another party.

It shook itself in disbelief, and smirked at the abusive simplicity of it all.

It finished getting ready to go, and left its apartment, repeating the question to itself, all the while grinning sadly.

The question was this: WHAT in the world AM I?

“Oh, hey,” said the aluminum foil. “What’s up?”

“Huh?” The wrapper found itself a bit more startled than it intended to be. “Oh, me? Oh, hi,” it replied.

“Hey,” repeated the aluminum foil.

“Hey.”

Awkward silence, while the aluminum foil bounced to the beat of the music.

“So, where is your friend?” ventured the wrapper.

“Who?”

“Your friend. You know, you always talk to it...”

“Oh, the plastic wrap. Yeah. It got used up.”

“Used up?”

“Yeah, used up. They used it up.”

“For what?”

“For food, of course.” The aluminum foil finally noticed that the wrapper was genuinely puzzled. “Um... for food. They wrap food with it. Me, too, actually.”

The wrapper managed to eke out a nod, but its puzzled look remained.

“Well, not so much any more. I’m more of a baking aid nowadays. Now that they improved plastic wraps so they stick or ... you know they have those things that have rubber bands in them?”

The wrapper nodded a bit more convincingly this time.

“So they don’t use me for the fridge so much. Mostly for baking.” The foil relaxed a bit, content with how this bit of conversation wrapped up, and started bouncing to the beat again.

“So that’s why you guys have been losing weight.”

“Yeah. We get used up. Yeah... Um... what? Wait, don’t you... huh... come to think of it, hey...! Interesting...” Now the foil nodded appreciatively.

“What?”

“No one’s been using you up, eh?”

“Oh, me? No.”

“Why not? You are so gorgeous they ought to be using you for, like, everything.”

“So I hear.”

“No, man. I’m serious. What’s a beautiful wrapper like you doing sitting around and no one using you up?”

“Dunno.” The wrapper shrugged.

“Man... There’s just no justice in this world, you know.”

“So I hear.”

“Man, oh, man, oh, man...” The foil seemed to lose focus, and started bouncing again.

“So..., ” ventured the wrapper.

“Hmmm?”

“So, you see I’m a wrapper, right?”

“Well, yeah, of course you are. What are you talking about?”

“Oh, it’s just that...” The wrapper shrugged again.

“Oh, man, you’re one of those po-mo types, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“You know, po-mo. Like, nothing is real. We are not who we are. We just dance at parties. That kind of shit.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, never mind. I don’t know what the hell you people think you are doing anyway. We go to parties, we go to work, we get used up, you know?”

“...”

“Oh, never mind.”

The wrapper decided some explanation, from both parties, was in order, and thought it should start first. “No, no, it’s just that... you see... I’m a wrapper, right? But I’m not wrapped around anything.”

“So?” The foil was not interested in the explanation.

“So how am I a wrapper if I’m not wrapped around anything?”

“Well, you just are, right? Like I’m a roll of aluminum foil. I’m not wrapped around anything. I’m just sitting here, tapping myself and talking to you. But I am still aluminum foil, you know.”

“But I’m not aluminum foil... I’m a wrapper. I’m supposed to wrap around things.”

“Things?”

“Yeah, things. Gifts. Boxes. Things.”

“Well, you’re wrapped around that cardboard core?”

“So? So are you! So was the plastic wrap. So is that toilet paper over there. So are paper towels... and fish paper.”

“So?”

“I’m not really wrapped around anything... important.”

“Important?”

“Yeah. Like gifts. And boxes.”

“Or food?”

“Or food. Yeah. Important. Food *is* important. Cardboard cores are not... important *per se*.”

“Important things, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.”

More bouncing.

“You know, have you met the Great Wrapper of the East?”

“The who?”

“The Great Wrapper of the East. Big dude. Thousands of yards wide. It’s wrapped around this big mountain out east. Oh, what is that mountain called... I can’t remember. Anyway, it’s way out east, and you can’t miss it. I’ve seen it only once, and, man, is the dude huge! Now a mountain... it was wrapped around an entire fucking mountain, you know. That’s important, ain’t it?”

“Ummm... yeah, I suppose so.”

“Is that like what you meant?”

“I suppose... so.”

“Ooh, well, I gotta go. I have a baking assignment. I’ll see you at the next party.”

“Um, OK. Yeah. Bye.”

“Unless they use me up.”

The foil disappeared as it chuckled to itself.

The wrapper regarded the bong sitting on the table in front of the couch. The pipe was stuffed with half-burnt crud of pot. The wrapper knew the bong well; it belonged to the foil.

“Crazy bastard,” muttered the wrapper, and it decided to leave the party.

After the conversation with the foil, the wrapper’s life seemed to return to the way it was before its unpleasant encounter with the stone. More of a general depression rather than a mortal loss of identity and being. So the life of moping about and going to parties continued on. The wrapper ran into the foil a few more times, but every time it was as if they had never talked before, and that was not entirely surprising considering the foil’s marijuana intake. Eventually, the foil stopped coming to parties. Got used up, the wrapper supposed. It felt a little sad at the loss of the closest thing to a friend it had ever had, but, then again, the depression had a large enough hold on its mind that the little sadness didn’t leave much of an impact.

The foil’s demise, however, got the wrapper thinking. The foil seemed content, perhaps even happy, at the thought of getting used up. It was like it had a purpose. A goal. Even if it meant it was going to disappear altogether, it had something to look forward to, for better or worse.

So, eventually, the wrapper started to displace the big, lingering, scary question in its mind—WHAT AM I?—with a smaller question—WHAT the hell SHOULD I DO WITH MYSELF? What is going to be my purpose? My end game? My plan?

And, after entertaining many random thoughts, the wrapper settled on a rather random goal: I will seek the Great Wrapper of the East. This will be my quest. For now, anyway.

The wrapper had come away from the conversation with the foil, probably because of how stoned the foil was, with a sense that it was going to be some trouble trying to find the Great Wrapper of the East. As it turned out, as the foil assured the wrapper, it was going to be a relatively

easy task. The wrapper's former colleagues at the paper magnates were quite helpful—on top of being ecstatically happy to hear from it—and supplied the wrapper with not only the directions to the Great Wrapper of the East, but also the Great Wrappers of the West, South, and the North. After cleaning up its affairs and doing some shopping, the wrapper was ready to embark on its quest.

The hard part, as the wrapper had suspected, was the physical aspect of the trek to the Great Wrapper of the East. Although the mountain that the Great Wrapper was wrapped around was quite large and easy to see from the plane and so forth, there were no developed highways or hiking trails that lead right up to the mountain. Worse still, the kind of mountainous journey with streams and cliffs and hills and stuff was something the wrapper had never undertaken. Yet it pushed ahead with its mission, and after days of hard trekking the mountain finally came into its view.

It was a majestic sight, this Great Wrapper. The volcanic mountain stood thousands of feet tall from the base, dwarfing all other mountain peaks, rendering them into mere molehills. The Great Wrapper was of the classic printed patterns on metallized paper variety. It showed signs of wear from the weather, but even the mottled and creased marks on the wrapper made it all the more majestic, as the glow of the sunlight reflected and refracted in ways only Mother Nature could orchestrate. Indeed, the Great Wrapper was no longer a mere paper product fashioned from human imagination. It was nature's greatness itself.

These appreciative thoughts occupied the wrapper's mind as it approached the Great Wrapper, and began to fill the wrapper's soul with a vague sort of hopefulness. Perhaps, maybe, this wasn't just a stupid idea meant to kill time. This was a journey not for a journey's sake, but a journey with a purpose... to, perhaps, find something. Meaning of life. Purpose. Identity. All in all, answers.

The wrapper began to believe that the Great Wrapper could perhaps help it... it wasn't sure how or for what. Just that something good would come of all this.

And this hope built up into something of a bliss as the wrapper finally came face-to-face with the Great Wrapper, panting, breathless, but happy, and somewhat fulfilled.

"Hello!" tried the wrapper.

There was silence. The Great Wrapper, it seemed, was asleep.

"Um, pardon me!" Tried the wrapper again.

"Hmmm?" Answered the Great Wrapper, sleepily, "Who disturbs my sleep? What do you think you are to disturb me from my majestic slumber?"

The wrapper was a bit taken aback, but ventured on, its newfound bliss propping up its ego the best it can. "Hello, are you the Great Wrapper of the East?"

"Indeed I am!" bellowed the Great Wrapper with the voice of a thousand rolls of wrapper. "I am the Great Wrapper that is wrapping the greatest mountain of the eastern lands. I am beauty and majesty itself, for I am the greatest."

"Uh..."

But the wrapper was instantly interrupted.

“I am the Great Wrapper because I am wrapped around something grand, something majestic. Yet you disturb me. I ask you again, JUST WHAT ARE YOU?”

This question threw the wrapper completely off. “Uh...”

“I ask you, and you must answer. WHAT ARE YOU?”

The wrapper’s heart sank. Here it was; after days and days of journeying, it had arrived at its goal. It was a frivolous goal at first. Mostly to kill time, it had thought. But, in doing so, it had decided on another goal: to find itself. To find out who it was. To find its purpose. It had come to hope that the Great Wrapper could—and, in fact, would—help it with this newfound task. It had come to believe that if anyone could help it, that would be the Great Wrapper of the East. The greatest. The most majestic. And, it had assumed, apparently incorrectly, the most magnanimous. The most helpful. Perhaps even kind.

Instead, the Great Wrapper confirmed the wrapper’s worst fears. It could not tell what the wrapper was. If the greatest wrapper of them all could not acknowledge that the wrapper was, in fact, a wrapper, then all was lost. It was hopeless. Useless.

“IF YOU WILL NOT ANSWER, then I shall return to my peace.”

And in peace the wrapper left the Great Wrapper, half weeping, half angry.

To its surprise, the wrapper didn’t feel in anyway deterred by the Great Wrapper’s behavior. The farther away it journeyed from the Great Wrapper of the East, the more the wrapper became convinced that the Great Wrapper’s opinions didn’t much matter. It was just a big piece of weathered paper, tattered all around and sleeping its senile sleep. Grandness and majesty and all that is good for sure, but what right does that give it to put the wrapper down like that?

With a disdainful harumph, the wrapper decided to not give it another thought, and turned its journey toward the south, to visit the Great Wrapper of the South. Just for the sake of it. No reason.

Yet, again, as day after day the wrapper trekked through the parching desert of the south—to which the wrapper was by design immune but which nonetheless got to it just from its sheer gruelingness—that same hope began to rise and claim the wrapper’s attention. Perhaps, even if the Great Wrapper of the East turned out to be a total jerk, perhaps the Great Wrapper of the South was a little different. Perhaps it had an answer for the wrapper. Perhaps it would be kind and helpful and ... And so forth.

So as the desert gave way to a chaparral, and as the chaparral gave way to a majestic forest, and as the Great Wrapper of the South finally came into the wrapper’s view, the wrapper’s soul was again full of hope, faith, and purposefulness. The Great Wrapper of the South was wrapped around the tallest, the most majestic forest of them all. It was not as big as the Great Wrapper of the East. Nor was it as splendorous. It was more of a dyed craft paper variety, ascetic in disposition and mood. The sunlight danced upon it in more subtle ways, the rays playing upon the creases and cracks that had developed over the years. It gave the wrapper a sense of calm and peace. If the Great

Wrapper of the East was the splendor of nature, the Great Wrapper of the South seemed to be more of the heart and soul of nature. It was good. It was holy. It was... also asleep.

Rolling its eyes in disappointment, the wrapper approached the Great Wrapper. It had a better idea for how to go about this enterprise this time.

“Um, ... excuse me.”

The wrapper gently tapped on the Great Wrapper.

“Ah... Oh...” the Great Wrapper awoke.

“Pardon me, oh Great Wrapper, but I have come on a quest.”

“Hmmm... Oh... Hmmm... Yes. Quest. You have come on a quest. But why?” The Great Wrapper perked up in attention. The voice was a bit sleepy, but nevertheless just as majestic as that of the other Great Wrapper.

“I have come to seek you, oh, majestic Great Wrapper.” The wrapper had basically decided to start up the conversation slowly, with lots of deference and flattery. It seemed to be working.

“Ah, to seek me. I see. Why?”

The wrapper decided to do another round of deference before going in for the point.

“For you are the Great Wrapper of the South... I have come to ask...”

But the wrapper was again interrupted.

“Yes, yes, they say I am the Great Wrapper of the South. I am, it seems, but I am never sure, that I am wrapped around the tallest and the most majestic of the forests. I am the harmony of nature. I am peace. I am... um... well... I am...” Sleepiness returned to its voice and it yawned.

The wrapper took this opportunity. “Yes, for that is the reason why I have come to seek your wisdom. I am...”

“That is,” continued the Great Wrapper regardless, “I am also Truth. For I am the Great Wrapper of the South, for being wrapped around the greatest forest in the whole world. Yes.”

“So...”

“And what do you say you are?”

This question, of course, stung, but the wrapper decided to hold its own this time.

“Can you not tell, oh, Great Wrapper?”

“Tell what?”

“What I am?”

“Uh... no. I cannot tell what you are unless you tell me what you are.”

The wrapper was disappointed, but not as crestfallen this time. This process was becoming a bit too predictable. It decided to just leave, shaking its head to itself.

“Wait, wait!” bellowed the Great Wrapper, “Don’t leave!!! I have answers. I have wisdom. Don’t you want to hear them? Wait!”

The wrapper just walked away.

The wrapper continued on its search for the Great Wrapper of the West. This time, the wrapper had little hope for anything left at all. The whole idea that some grand piece of paper could

simply tell it what it was, when it bloody well knew what it was, or it thought it did, for it was a wrapper, and so these oversized idiots can't tell me what I am, what's the big deal.

And so the wrapper mumbled to itself as it proceeded westward. It was definitely disdainful of the whole lot. Great Wrappers indeed. Who do they think they are to tell me what I am or am not?

But the mood changed entirely as the wrapper trekked over a small mountain range and the majestic expanse of the Great Ocean spread out before it. The wrapper had never seen anything like it before. The light. The ripples. The waves. The foam. The dancing of the light, ripples, the waves, the foam... It was beauty itself.

The wrapper had been told a few times in the trade shows that it was reminiscent of the Great Ocean, and the wrapper figured it was a compliment, but had no idea just how much of a compliment... it was more of a sacrilege, to compare a mere paper-and-plastic foil to such greatness.

And so the wrapper's heart began to fill with something anew... some kind of hope, or at least some kind of peace. A sense that this was all coming to an end.

And the Great Wrapper itself didn't hurt at all. It was of the pearlescent Mylar type, very modern, basically in the same genre as the wrapper. On top of this kinship, the wrapper was thoroughly impressed by the sheer scale of the Great Wrapper wrapped around the entire Great Ocean. Here too, the years have and have not been kind to the Great Wrapper; having corroded and faded the pearlescence, the ocean also gave the Great Wrapper a gentle and turbulent motion that none of the other Great Wrappers managed to attain.

"Hey, who goes there?"

This was new. The wrapper didn't expect to be noticed until it was practically on top of the Great Wrapper, and the kind, rolling, mellow voice of the Great Wrapper of the West caught it completely off guard.

"Ummm... hi!"

"Hey."

Moments of silence passed.

"Ummm... oh, ah, Great Wrapper..."

"Call me Mindy."

"What?"

"Mindy. That's my name. As in, 'Hey, there. I'm Mindy. Who are you?'"

"Oh, ah. Oh, hi, Mindy, I've come to see... you, the Great Wrapper..."

"Mindy."

"... to see you, the Mindy of the West... ?"

"Oh, I see. You wanted to see the Great Wrapper of the West. Yeah. Sure. That's me. The Great Wrapper of the West. Welcome. What can I do you for?"

"I am... on a quest... to discover who I am."

"Discover who you are?"

"Yes."

“Don’t you already know?”

“Ummm... I thought so, but...”

“Ah. You have doubt. The doubtful wanderer. Mmmmm...”

“So...”

“Yes?”

“Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Know who I am?”

“Ooh... tricky. Tricky, tricky, tricky. You see... I am the Great Wrapper of the West. I am the Wrapper of Serenity, Confidence, and Comfort. I can only help you if you know, and are sure about, who you are.”

“Oh, I see...” The wrapper began to have the tickly, icky feeling running down its core. Not this again...

“What you need, is to see the Great Wrapper of Wisdom. The Great Wrapper of the North. That’s the one who can help you.”

“The Great Wrapper of the North?”

“That’s right.”

“I see...”

The wrapper considered this a moment. It had already journeyed to the east, the south, and the west, all to no avail. With much disappointment, despite how little hope it had had in the first place. To journey to the north now, to the rugged mountains, lakes, and forests that promised to be tougher going than any of the places it had been to. Probably to be disappointed again.

“Hey.”

“Yes... Mindy?”

“You should give it a try. You won’t be disappointed. I promise.”

So the wrapper decided, what the hell, to give it a try. It was sure it would be disappointed, but the Great Wrapper’s soothing, serene voice convinced it that at least the journey would be worth a try. There was nothing to lose but time, anyway.

So the wrapper trekked to the north, across great rivers, across great plains, across great lakes, trudging across valleys and over hills. For days and days and days it walked. The journey was not as treacherous as the wrapper had thought, but it was not easy, and, most importantly, it was terribly, terribly boring. The landscape of the north was monotonous. Continuous. Expansive. Not breathtaking *per se*. Not fabulously gorgeous *per se*. Just miles and miles and miles of trees and water and hills and valleys.

It became almost painful how boring it all was. And as pain gave way to desperation, the wrapper began to have serious doubts about the journey. Not that the wrapper had any great hope at all at this point. It’s just that the wrapper began to consider this whole thing a serious waste of time. Almost *criminal* waste of time. It thought to itself, “I could be doing something useful. Productive.

Helpful, and here I am in search of answers to questions the answers to which I already know. At least I started out thinking that I knew who I was, and here I am asking a bunch of nobodies and has-beens who they think I am, and I'm actually having more and more doubt rather than any kind of clarity. I'm not just *not* getting the answers; I'm getting my mind so screwed up that I'm beginning to lose what confidence in myself I ever had..."

And so it continued, until it arrived at the place where the Great Wrapper of the North was supposed to be. However, there was no sign of the Great Wrapper whatsoever. Its contacts at the paper magnates were a bit vague about the Northern Great Wrapper's appearance. They spoke at length about the grandeur and splendor of the other Great Wrappers, adding that there is no way one can miss them once one is in the mere vicinity of the Great Wrappers. But, about the Northern one, there was a bit of a sense of mystery... kind of like no one had ever seen it for oneself. So no big mountains, no big trees, no great oceans. Just a little clearing in the middle of a sparse spruce forest. No Great Wrapper and nothing to be seen.

The wrapper was relieved, in fact. If the Great Wrapper of the North wasn't here, or perhaps didn't even exist, then there was no need for it to bother with this stupid quest any more. It was over and done with. It was time to go back home.

Like most people who haven't really developed a serious career to pursue or abandon, and have no specific skills, but have seen the world to its four corners and have some idea about what life should be all about, although not with any certainty, the wrapper decided to go to school. Armed with decent standardized test scores and some exceptionally well-written essays, it managed to get into an undergraduate program in philosophy at the University of _. It turned out the wrapper was a natural for the stuff. It quickly mastered the history of Western philosophy from presocratics to contemporary, and plunged head on into poststructuralism and hermeneutics. Its advisor was eager to enroll it in the graduate program at the University right after graduation, and the wrapper sailed through the qualification process, earning distinctions every step of the way.

The dissertation was a bit of a challenge. Having been steeped in trendy philosophical movements that valued critique, irony, and negation, the wrapper found it hard to finally put forth an idea positively, to formulate an argument that forcefully establishes something as true and real, to argue something that is worth believing in. But, after a year-long writing block, a breakthrough came when the wrapper finally landed on a phantom enemy: identity politics. In the end arguing against the proposition that one's actions are and should be informed by who one is, the wrapper produced a masterpiece titled "Stratification of Behavior." The wrapper began with the old, usual criticism of identity politics which argues that action and identity are, essentially, in a circular relationship, neither being prior to the other, but defining each other in turn. Most critics of identity politics also pointed out that identity is necessarily fluid, uncertain, manufactured, and as such cannot form a fundamental basis for anything, let alone action. Then came the big twist: what if action is the same way? It's not just that identity is "not real" because it is essentially manufactured to justify action; or because we all have multiple, conflicting identities and hence

motives for multiple, conflicting courses of action; or because through action we define who we are. What throws a huge monkey wrench in the whole process is the fact that, basically, *action is not real, either*. All the tools with which we doubt the “realness” of identity can just as easily be used to doubt the “realness” of action. It is an illusion to think that action is real just because we can palpate it; palpation is an illusory impression of social interactions, just like identity. So much so that we can turn the history of philosophy on its head by seeing it as a struggle against the unavoidable fact that action is illusory, imaginary, and dynamically and discursively defined. And this is what the dissertation proved.

By the time the dissertation was finished, landed the wrapper a tenure-track job at a research university, and came out as a book, it had caused a huge sensation not only in philosophy, but also in political science, anthropology, and legal studies. The wrapper, of course, almost didn’t quite notice the stir it had created, even as brilliant graduate students came knocking on its department’s door, even after seeing swelling audiences at every paper it presented at conferences and talks, even after journals after journals devoted to the new field of “Action Studies” began popping up like mushrooms. No, the wrapper didn’t really notice it at all. It just went on teaching its classes, advising students, writing more articles and books.

And what articles! “Spontaneity and Fissures in Being” unearthed the contradictions in Socratic dialogues that originated in Plato’s inability to conceive of praxis in terms other than production and destruction. “Generalness that binds” critiqued the scholars who attempted to make Nietzsche coherent by showing that they all started from a false assumption, which essentially seemed to be that Nietzsche had written in the shadow of Heidegger, not the other way around. “Narrative Fictions: False Consciousness of the Bookworm” ventured into a critique of literary criticism as an enterprise by arguing that the very idea that works of fiction contain narratives within them was an illusory assumption, and spoke more of the people who argued such points than of the works of fiction themselves. Not to let its ostensible colleagues off the hook, “Present Perfect” reviewed disparate branches of Action Studies by pointing out that the term “Studies” itself suggested action, and should have been suspect as such. The follow up article, “Past Progressive” clarified the point further by claiming that the solution therefore was not “inaction,” but something akin to “Negated Thrownness,” or the acceptance of dysclarity in action and in interaction.

And what books! The much anticipated second book, *Periods of Fluidity*, departed from *Stratification of Behavior* by looking at the problematics of studying something that conceivably was not real. Identity, although well known to be unreal and manufactured, functioned as if it had been real, and was studied as if it had been real without much ill effects. Could the same be true of action? Could the same be true of anything that was “not real” in the same way? The answer was a very discreetly qualified “Yes, of course!” The problem had never been that action or identity or anything else could be examined as if they had been real. The problem, instead, was in reconciling falseness with observability; or, in fact, accepting the impossibility of reconciling falseness with observability without abandoning falseness *or* observability. In the end, the wrapper argued, the question was not a practical one, but an ethical one: what was the proper mindset of an observer

observing something one knows to be unreal, imaginary, and false? Here was the wrapper's real blow to its trendy colleagues in Action Studies: humility. Acceptance of ignorance. Acceptance of irrelevance. Back to Socrates, unfettered by Platonic *hubris*.

The "Ethical Turn" was what people called this new phase in Action Studies inaugurated by *Periods*. The wrapper's popularity did not diminish at all with this rather scathing critique of all of its followers. Quite the contrary. Its popularity soared once again, delivering more, even smarter graduate students, larger audiences, and more devoted journals.

After many more books, more "turns," more journals, the time came finally for the wrapper to retire. Time had been both kind and unkind to the wrapper. It had trouble moving about, although the wrapper remained as independent and vigorous as ever. Its beautiful layers of iridescence, once reminiscent of the Great Ocean, had worn off in many places, leaving a distinguished mottle of base stock behind. Its edges were all frayed. Even its durable core was somewhat crunched up and no longer straight, round, or firm. The wrapper was still beautiful, tho', and certainly was the most revered sight in all of academia.

After a few years of lingering as an emeritis professor, the wrapper decided to retire for real, and bought a cabin in a forest up north, far, far away from its beloved University, its home of many years. In this cabin the wrapper led a simple life, dabbling in but never really finishing some writing projects. Attempting to garden and failing miserably. Corresponding with friends and colleagues. Occasionally the wrapper visited the University for stately functions... some designed to lure more students with the false hope of working with Professor Wrapper... It was a dirty work the wrapper was more than willing to do, as a way of paying back the University for many years of fun and comfort.

One evening, while dozing off in its favorite chair, the wrapper heard a knock on the cabin door. After much creaking and fumbling about, the wrapper opened the door. There, on the welcome mat, stood a sheepish roll of plain but young and beautiful, purple, coated wrapper.

"Hi... are you Professor Wrapper? I'm a student at..."

"Yes, yes, come in."

Professor Wrapper motioned the young wrapper toward a comfortable chair, into which the young wrapper sat.

"Would you like some tea? I was just about to make some."

"Yes, ... I mean... yes, that would be nice. Please," replied the young wrapper.

After the teas were made, Professor Wrapper settled back into its favorite chair.

"So, is there something I can do for you?"

The young wrapper looked up from its tea. It grinned momentarily, then shook its head, became somber, and spoke. "Ummm... I was wondering, that is, they say... Ummm..." It took another sip of tea.

"Go ahead."

“Are you the Great Wrapper of the North?”

Professor Wrapper barely contained a chortle and smiled instead. The Great Wrapper of the North? It had been many years since its journey in search of all the Great Wrappers, and the failure to find the Great Wrapper of the North, although ancient history, still stung a bit whenever Professor Wrapper ruminated over the memory. Still, the whole thing now was just an interesting anecdote from what it now considered to be another life altogether. No need to give the poor kid a hard time about it.

“No, indeed not. I’m not.”

The young wrapper seemed a little disappointed, but went on, “Well, it’s just that I have a question... for the Great Wrapper. I’ve been told it can help me, and ...”

In the way the young wrapper’s voice trailed off in doubt, Professor Wrapper thought it detected something familiar. Perhaps the way its own voice had trailed off in embarrassment or disappointment many, many years ago. Professor Wrapper was certain it knew the question the young wrapper wanted to ask. It also by now knew very well the answer it had wanted to get, it should have gotten, in reply to the question, but never did.

“This question. What is it? Maybe I can answer it.”

The young wrapper looked up with a little less doubt.

“It is... it is...”

“Yes, go on.”

“What am I?”

“What are you? How do you mean?”

“... I mean...” Disappointment crept into the young wrapper’s voice.

Not to lose the moment, or the young wrapper’s trust, Professor Wrapper jumped in. “It’s just that, to me, it’s obvious you are a wrapper. A beautiful roll of wrapper. Pure and simple.”

The answer, having been rehearsed many times in the Professor’s mind, did the trick exactly as the Professor had imagined it would.

The young wrapper’s face brightened. A look of discovery, a look of clarity blossomed in its beautiful complexion.

There was nothing more to be said. The young wrapper got up from its chair, and gave the Professor a heartfelt hug, choking down a tear. The young wrapper left without another word, prancing down the driveway in happiness never before seen in a roll of wrapper.

The next time the Professor went down to the University, it tried to inquire about the new graduate students and their demographics. It was quickly introduced to a couple of new graduate students who happened to be wrappers, and happened to be there to meet the famed Professor Wrapper. Neither of them was the young wrapper that had visited the Professor in its woodland cabin.

A few more not-so-discreetly placed questions revealed that, in fact, there were only a few more wrappers in the student body, and none of them matched the description of the visitor at all.

It took several more weeks of leisurely search to convince the Professor that the young visitor was not a student at the University, or at any University. It took another several weeks before the Professor could reflect on the actual content of the conversation.

It thought it all over one day, sipping a cup of tea in its favorite chair. The young wrapper had come with a question. The same question the Professor had carried with it to the three Great Wrappers, and then to the Great Wrapper of the North, the Wrapper of Wisdom, who had happened to have disappeared. It turned out that the Professor had had the right answer all along; only, it took many years of detour through academia and the visit of a young soul to pry it out of the depths of its heavily plagued up mind.

And it was the right answer, all right. It just needed to be said out loud for it to be truly so. All it took was action.

And the Professor had the young wrapper to thank for this revelation.

Indeed, the Professor realized with satisfaction and amusement, the young wrapper was really the Wrapper of Wisdom, the Great Wrapper of the North, whose company the Professor had sought many years ago in a state of doubt, and in whose company it attained, finally, a state of clarity.

The Professor lumbered out of its favorite chair toward the front door. It opened the door; no one was standing there. It said, "Thank you," very, very quietly, closed the door, and returned to its cup of tea.

With apologies to Norton Juster and Nathaniel Hawthorne