

Alight in the Lamp Seller's Red

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“Send your hopes to the heavens!” His words elicited reluctant glances from those who walked along the beach. The man wore a vest covered with bright red lamps lit by tiny electric bulbs. Sideward glances, backward glances, and the occasional stare. He was hard to miss and harder to avoid. With each eye he caught, and even to those he didn't, he waved his hot paper lamp and drew closer. They gave him a wide berth in return. “Five dollars. One lamp five dollars. Send your hopes up high.”

The lamp seller noticed a girl stumble between her parents as she twisted to look back at him. Her parents each held a hand to guide her, but the girl escaped their loose grips. Before the parents could stop her, she stood in his red glow, crimson lamp in her hand. She peered down the deep lamp and turned it over to inspect the bottom. He looked up at the parents with his hand outstretched. “First thing's first, dear.” “Now then,” he said as he flicked through the bills. The lamp seller knelt down and winked at the girl.

“Wishes don't move with electric lights. We need to use fire to send your hopes up high!” Her eyes followed as he waved his hand toward the night sky.

“Now, you're going to have to make a good wish. Something really good. You don't want to waste this chance.” The girl looked with wide eyes at the lamp and then to her parents. Her mother shuffled her feet in the sand while her father watched the waves roll in. *Click. Click. Click.* A soft glow rose within the lamp until her hands looked like printed silhouettes against the red paper. She closed her eyes and searched her hopes for the right one. Then, she tossed it up.

The lamp wobbled in place a few moments. She peered around the lamp at the seller. He met her skeptical eyes with a smile and pushed the lamp on its way. The red fabric disappeared into the night sky so that the constant flame itself appeared to move upward. The light stood out against a sky made darker by the dull light of nearby convenience shops and neon signs.

The people around the beach had stopped, eyes trained above while the lamp lived and died. The parents, who held their child's shoulders, watched money burn away. Those folk nearby saw something they wanted to try for free. At their hotel window, the honeymooners who had watched the dark ocean roll in wondered where the plane headed with its many passengers. Those out for a walk further down the beach saw the rhythmic light of a satellite in orbit. The child stood with her hands outstretched, the lamp's warmth still tingling as it burned to nothing. She watched her hope rise to some distant unknown person to grant.

As he scanned their faces, the seller took another lamp off his vest. He unscrewed the smudged bulb where the lamp had been until it was empty of its artificial light. The lamp seller left them to their thoughts and continued down the beach. "Send your hopes to the heavens!"