

**The First Two Pages of “A Currency of Wishes” by Kate Fellowes**  
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An Essay by Kate Fellowes

For me, one of the toughest parts of writing is coming up with a title that fits the work just-so. It needs to attract a reader, give a hint, and set a tone. That’s a tall order. This story, “A Currency of Wishes,” bears my very favorite title. I hope readers find it intriguing—how does one pay for a wish?—and read on.

To brainstorm on title ideas, I use a form of free writing. I divide my paper into two columns, or perhaps three, to represent aspects and elements of the story, then write down every word that comes to mind associated with those. In a minute or two, I’ve got a list of wonderful words. Choosing one from column A, etc., takes a lot longer. But looking at the words, fitting them together like a puzzle, helps me find my way to what seems the perfect title.

Then, it’s on to the action.

Josh O’Leary shook his head.

“I don’t want to hear this, Uncle Kenny,” he said, scrubbing one hand over his face.

From this initial exchange, we learn a few things. One man is young, one man is older, and they are in conflict. Josh’s actions, shaking his head and rubbing his face, clearly indicate his discomfort. What is his uncle planning to tell him?

Bad news of some sort. Indeed.

The older man, sitting across the booth from him, leaned forward. “Just hear me out,” he said, his voice low. “I’ve got a foolproof plan.”

“But your last foolproof plan got you ten years, didn’t it?” Josh sat back, distancing himself from the ex-con.

Uncle Kenny is full of enthusiasm for his new plan, whatever it is, brazenly believing it will work, while Josh’s remark makes it all too clear that these plans have proven disastrous in the past. Josh is a nice guy, deferential to his older relative but hesitant to engage. He has to physically move away as he expresses his reluctance to listen. Uncle Kenny assures him he’d been betrayed by his partner that other time, but this time, that can’t happen, because they are family. Kenny knows just what button to push with his nephew, what he can lean on, to draw Josh closer.

Their discussion, at the local diner, is interrupted briefly by the arrival of another customer, a pretty young woman who has a smile as bright as a summer day. She drifts past them to the counter, leaving a trail of perfume with the swish of her skirt. While Kenny makes a rude remark under his breath, reinforcing his view of the world, Josh is entranced. Kenny hurries on, selling his idea by relying on past glory and family lore.

“You know what they used to call me, right, Josh? Back in the day.”

Josh knew, all right. He’d been hearing it since he was a boy.

“The Moonlight Marauder.” They said it together, Kenny with pride, Josh with resignation.

Kenny slapped the tabletop with his palm. “Danny the Knife himself gave me that name and that’s sayin’ something. He said it was because all my ideas were...what?”

“As bright as the moon,” Josh repeated the phrase he’d heard a hundred times from Uncle Kenny. The highlight of Kenny’s life had

been getting a clever nickname from a convicted felon. Josh shuddered at the thought.

These two men are as different as chalk and cheese. One can imagine Uncle Kenny's visits to the house when Josh was child, telling the stories his nickname earned him, puffing up his importance by linking it to a more powerful criminal, painting himself as one of the gang. Even in memory, these stories make Josh shudder, a silent, physical gesture in direct counterpoint to Uncle Kenny's attention-grabbing table slap.

Josh tries to derail his uncle again, insisting "No means no." But such a simple and straight-forward tactic is powerless against the ex-con.

"We couldn't even try this if you weren't so smart. That's how you landed the internship at the museum, right? Being smart?"

"Well," Josh admitted, "yes."

"And what are you doing there? Tell me again."

With this exchange, we can see what Josh can't: that Uncle Kenny is putting a bit of bait on a hook, ready to reel his nephew in. Who could resist this appeal to vanity? This flattery, and the invitation to go into detail about his new job, reveals Kenny as a master manipulator and reinforces the naiveté of the youthful Josh. If Josh were a more seasoned individual, this ploy wouldn't work so easily. Alas, he is a young man of college age, working at a new job that rewards his scholarship, puffing him up by his association with the museum, in the same way Uncle Kenny claimed importance through his association with the dangerous Danny the Knife.

“It’s a great opportunity. I’ll get valuable experience in my field.”

“Which is?” Kenny had forgotten.

“History. American history, with an emphasis on the Civil War era,” Josh said. “The museum doesn’t address that, exactly. It’s more specialized—maritime history on the Great Lakes. But my research skills are applicable. And the methodology—”

“What are they paying you?” Kenny interrupted.

Having indulged his nephew’s enthusiasm for the new job long enough, Kenny cuts to the chase, but then the pretty young woman strolls past again on her way out, distracting Josh and disarming him, as well, by the lilt of her laugh as she bids the counter staff farewell. Everything about this woman, Mallory Vogel, is appealing. Her ease of movement is carefree, her friendliness with the workers is compassionate, her ready smile radiates cheerfulness. When she aims that smile at Josh, he doesn’t even hear his uncle’s question.

But Uncle Kenny will persist.

“A Currency of Wishes” is my take on a “crime in plain sight” plot. I’ve long been intrigued by stories where clues are hidden right under the nose, just waiting for discovery. When I read the submission call for *Moonlight and Misadventure*, I immediately thought of this story of misadventure, where the crime is not bloody, the intensity is not that of a thriller, and the motive is not world domination. The smaller, more life-size stage lets me focus on human nature, expectations and inevitable outcomes.

So, exactly what are the “currency of wishes”? Come join me in the moonlight and find out.

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Kate Fellowes is the author of six mysteries, most recently *A Menacing Brew*. Her short stories and essays have appeared in several anthologies, as well as *Victoria*, *Woman's World*, *Brides*, *Romantic Homes*, and other periodicals. In 2020, she won the San Diego Public Library's Matchbook Short Story contest. A founding member of the Wisconsin Chapter of Sisters in Crime, her working life has revolved around words—editor of the student newspaper, reporter for the local press, cataloger in her hometown library. A graduate of Alverno College in Milwaukee, she blogs about work and life at <http://katefellowes.wordpress.com> and shares her home with a variety of companion animals.