



The Magician

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To James the Magician

As if by miracle, I made it through airport security without a hitch and stepped for the first time on Irish soil. 'Ok, you good?' I asked, although there was seemingly no one around to answer. The box I was holding shook in agreement.

A smile appeared on my face as I remembered an old friend...

We called him Magician and – this might come as a surprise – he was a magician. You wouldn't see him wearing a pointy hat or riding through the streets of Prague in a carriage drawn by roosters, but a Prague magician he was, no doubt. A magician with a capital M. He didn't need another name; everyone knew right away. If you came upon him in a bar, he would give you a sly look, finish his glass of whiskey and pull out a pack of cards.

'Draw one,' he turned to me, his eyes empty this time, devoid of all interest.

'I know this trick.'

'You have no idea,' he pointed a finger at me, then lowered his hand again to try and drink from the empty glass for at least the fifth time.

'You have no idea what magic trick I'm about to show you.'



'I know them all,' I replied, noticing that the shirt under his steampunk vest, usually crystal white, was now dirty and crumpled. As if he hadn't changed in days.

'When was the last time you went outside?' I leaned in with a touch of distrust. I didn't like it in the slightest, seeing him sitting alone at a table in one of those dim underground Prague non-stop bars.

I remembered his beginnings well, the flying start and his magic performances in places where you would never expect to see this type of show. He would show off his skills at the fanciest parties, enjoying the attention of models, who would leave their gelled-up football players and dapper aging businessmen standing in the foyer just to go watch even the most ordinary tricks of his. I reckon that must have been it. Although the Magician had always been more handsome than me, he was no cover model, either. Still, it always took people quite a while to notice. His irresistible charm helped to cover any imperfections and made every vice seem like a great virtue, meant to be displayed with pride. He had been just a boy with an unfortunate background, living in an apartment on the outskirts, who then probably first started becoming the center of attention at posh family gatherings, then moved on to perform magic tricks for sheikhs in the Middle East and eventually one day, he sent me a video of himself drunkenly screaming into the phone camera at what had originally been a very formal function at the Italian embassy in Lima, which he'd somehow managed to turn into an unexpectedly wild party.

'Man, these Peruvian chicks are totally crazy!' he'd tried to shout above the din in his German-accented English. 'Ladies, say hi to Martin!' Right on cue, about ten caked-up South American models had started waving and yelling over one another.

It was quite shocking to see what had become of him.



'When was the last time I did what?' he asked absentmindedly, still twiddling the pack of cards. I keep mentioning the cards, I know, even though they were hardly ever part of his programme. Except in bars and pubs. There he wouldn't put them down. Admittedly, if card tricks didn't have this reputation of mediocrity, I believe he would have made a nice living using just those. But no. Card tricks weren't the fulcrum of his performance, nor did he rely on sawing a woman in half or levitating a ferret. He bet on humor and stories. His performance was an amalgam of storytelling, stand-up comedy, drama, and yes, there were a few magic tricks as well.

'Draw a card,' he urged me again. I reached over but the cards suddenly went flying in all directions – some landed in my beer glass, a few fell on the table, a few more underneath it, others made it all the way across the aisle to the dartboard. 'Dammit, that... that wasn't it... I'll pick them up later,' he waved his hand as I pulled the queen of spades and the seven of clubs out of the glass and started flapping them in the air in an attempt to dry them.

'Dude, what is wrong with you?'

'Four days.'

'Four days what?'

'For four days I haven't left this dive. I miss porn,' he let out a sob.

'Oh yeah, because that's what you need right now,' I couldn't resist a slight jab. 'I'll take you home, what do you say?'

'No!' he exclaimed loudly, straightening up. 'I have to stay here. I haven't got my magical... whatchamacallit back yet!' And in that moment, I realized that not only had I witnessed his unlikely rise to success, but I was also about to get a front-row seat to his fall.

'It's in the basement,' he added after a while, looking somewhere over my head, which wasn't exactly hard since I had just bent over to collect the cards fallen under the table.



'What's in the basement?' I came back up.

'My magical... thingamajig, what else? I can't leave without it. I've been sneaking and skulking but so far – nothing.'

'Ask the bartender, then, to let you into the basement,' I retorted, perhaps a little too harshly. The guy obviously needed help, even though he was speaking in metaphors. I'm no psychologist, so I wasn't entirely sure what exactly he was trying to say but he was definitely trying to say something.

He leaned over and grabbed me tightly by my tie. 'I can't. Don't you get it?'

'Dude, let go. You're hammered, this is pointless.'

'Help.'

The way he said it – I couldn't turn him down. I mean, I could, but seeing him like this was hard enough as it was, so I definitely didn't want to see that long face get any longer.

'Alright, fine. What do I do?'

'It's easy,' he pulled away to his side of the table again. 'Just go to the basement and bring it to me.'

'And what on earth does *it* look like?'

The Magician gave me a lopsided grin and for a second I spotted the same spark in his eyes that, just a few weeks ago, had him making more money per show than I do in a year. Then he lay his head down and – mumbling indistinctly something that I feel were not magic words – fell asleep.

I should have left it at that. Should have just dragged him up the stairs, called him a taxi and taken him home. But I couldn't. Why? Sure, we grew up together and if there's someone who really knows me, it's him, but it was also a matter of simple curiosity. I got up from the table and brazenly opened the door to the basement.



In front of me was a dimly lit staircase, which led down under the pub; its bottom was concealed by darkness. The descent was long, so long it seemed almost impossible, when suddenly:

'Who's there?' said a ghoulishly deep voice. I was properly startled. Still, I didn't let the trick throw me off balance.

'I'm a dashing young man called Martin and I come on behalf of the Magician. The one with a capital M!' I roared, partly because of the beer in my veins and partly because I felt like a fairytale character.

The basement – immersed in darkness until now – lit up with bright light. I walked down the last three steps and found myself in a large room full of display cases. I tried to act nonplussed, as if all non-stop pubs had a secret museum underneath them, rather than a storage room full of beer barrels and packets of chips.

I couldn't see where the voice was coming from, though.

'I have what the Magician wants,' it informed me, although I had already figured that part out myself.

'Do you have a body, too? Or is he keeping it as collateral? I'm good at bargaining, I can arrange that he returns it to you in exchange for his... eh, his magical... doodah.' Whatever was happening here, I knew well that in any fight, it's safest to always agree to the rules of the game.

'I do have a body,' replied the unnaturally deep voice. My attention was then drawn to a hallway in the northern part of the room – I hadn't noticed it until then but it must have been here the whole time, coming out behind the lit showcase that contained what looked like human hands with finger stumps – and I saw a little man, about thirty centimetres tall with wings clipped to his back, walk into the room.

'And you are...?'



'A pub fairy. Well, don't gawk like that, you're no looker, either,' the man remarked witheringly in the voice of the devil himself.

'Eh, right. I see.'

'Oh, please,' he looked me up and down with contempt. 'As if you've ever heard of us. All the Prague legends have ignored our existence.'

'I'm sorry, I-'

'You're not,' he fired back. 'Neither am I, for that matter,' he added as he walked around the showcase and, pointing at it, said: 'this is all that's left of the *hejkals* after they were wiped out. Everything you see here are the remains of extinct creatures that used to live in Prague a long time ago. We were only left alone because people had forgotten about us.'

'What can I do to get the Magician's... thingamabob... back?' I quickly asked before he could start showing me severed vodyanyo heads, all the while trying to keep from looking in the direction where I thought I had caught a glimpse of some. The tiny man flapped his wings and leaned on the showcase.

'So the Magician would like to get his power back, huh? Well isn't that nice! Did he also mention how he'd double crossed me after getting it?'

'I'm sorry, I have no idea what-'

'You're right you don't! How could you? Well, let me tell you then, you townie. Where do you think he suddenly got his mojo? And why do you think we gave it to him?' he answered his first question with his second one. 'Don't even try,' he took the wind out of my sails as I opened my mouth to speak. 'He promised to help, said he'd take us away and drop us off in pubs all over the world. Somewhere with fresher air where we'd be happier.' For a second it looked like he got lost in a daydream but for all I know, I may have misread the



expression on his potato of a face. 'I was promised Dublin! Music and singing every night, pints of Guinness and falling asleep in whiskey casks at dawn. And leprechaun girls, wahoo, I'm sure you know what I mean.'

'I think you might be idealising it a little. Ireland – Dublin, especially – isn't what it–'

'Zip it! I know exactly what I want. And the Magician didn't give it to me. He'd like that, wouldn't he? Keep the gift but not the promise.'

'Why don't I bring him down here so you guys can talk like two sensible–'

'The bastard better not set a foot down here if he doesn't want to end up glassed in!' shrieked the runt, spreading his wings in a threatening manner as he pointed at an empty showcase on my right. 'But here's an idea, if you vouch for him, I'll let you take his mojo – his magical powers–,' he spit on the ground after those words, 'back to him. On the condition that you beat me in a fistfight. But just you wait, man, I can fly blisteringly fast!'

I remembered everything the Magician had done for me. How he drove me to the hospital when I broke my leg on an iron-clad door, trying to kick his ass, no less. How he lent me money when he was at the peak of his career and never asked for it back. How he continually talked me up to his cousin, who my teen self had the biggest crush on, and even though nothing ever came out of it, how many people would do something like that for a person?

'Alright,' I agreed. 'I'm in.'

Twenty minutes later, I was sitting back at the table. Sweaty, tired and out of breath, probably also with blood trickling down from my earlobe after that midget had chomped down on it before I managed to frantically pull him off me and fling him against the wall. I felt that



he didn't quite stick to boxing rules but then again, what do I know about the boxing culture of pub fairies? They probably fight according to the same laws that all pub dwellers do, cowardly throwing chairs at their opponent should he make the mistake of turning his back to them. I've had that happen to me a few times.

'I'm sorry, my friend,' I gave the Magician a sad smile. There was another glass of whiskey placed in front of him while he himself looked just about ready to put down roots and become one of the city ghosts, forever stuck in one place, passing centuries by creeping out random visitors with their sad stories. This guy will probably add in a botched attempt at a card trick before covering them in puke as a parting gift. While I'm leaving the airport at this very moment, he's undoubtedly still sitting in that non-stop bar. Also, he hasn't aged a single day in two years. But back to that moment when I was about to tell him about my unsuccessful fight against the pub fairy.

'I thought I was gonna get that imp, but he turned out to be... a tricky one.'

He didn't respond. Having resigned himself to his fate, he just nodded and downed another glass of whiskey.

I got up and climbed the stairs. I, the new Magician.