

Upon the Unexpected Discovery of Magic

His first feat of magic was heralded not by the crash of thunder, but the shrill pealing of an iPhone alarm.

Dennis awoke to find himself sprawled on the living room couch. His cheek peeled off the cushion as he lifted his head. The taste of cheap red wine still sour in his mouth.

The phone was bleating on the coffee table. Every trill like a nail to the temple. He winced and reached out for the snooze button. The phone was just out of grasp and as he strained, the curtains stirred even though there was no breeze. He saw the glowing screen rise from the tabletop and float towards his open hand. The charger cord pulled taut and it hovered there, like a helium balloon on a string.

Dennis dropped his hand and the phone fell. It bounced off the coffee table and smacked crisply on the floor. The alarm petered out with a sickly whine.

He sat up, drawing the throw rug up to his neck. Had that really just happened? Or was this some sort of waking dream? He peered down at his hand. He turned his palm over, wiggled his fingers. Nothing seemed different.

There was a coffee mug on the television cabinet. He extended his hand and pictured the mug gliding across the room into his grasp. He held the pose for a count of ten. A bead of sweat formed on his brow.

Nothing.

A dream then.

He kicked off the throw rug and plodded over to the mug. Amy was going to be livid with the mess he had made. Empty bottles and pizza boxes strewn about the living room. The remains of a shattered wine glass glinting on the tiles. Maybe that was when he had stopped drinking. He looked into the mug. A scarlet wine ring staining the bottom. *Ah. Maybe not.*

He swept up the shards of glass with a dustpan, but left the rest. The deadline for his sales presentation would not wait and the morning sun was already starting to leak around the edge of the blinds. When he went into the kitchen, he had to shield his eyes from the light.

I could kill for some caffeine.

He started running the hot water. He had almost forgotten about the floating phone when he went to fetch the mug and found that it was now full with black coffee.

He eyed the mug suspiciously.

Perhaps this was a different one?

But the coffee was fresh. A waft of steam rising and quivering above it. It smelled rich and earthy and slightly acrid. He took a tentative sip. It was good. Hot and bitter, just the way he liked it.

Maybe I should see a doctor?

And tell them what?

He drank the rest of the coffee then went to the main bathroom to shower. Amy had left a folded set of clothes on the floor outside their bedroom. He lingered at the door. It was open a crack and through the sliver of a gap he could see her form laying on the bed. Asleep. Or at least pretending.

“Have a great day, my love,” he said under his breath.

He checked his watch. There was no time. Not for cleaning. Not for conciliation.

There had been an accident on the highway. Dennis sat in the car, surveying the traffic from the lights at the top of the hill. The queue of cars snaked down, around and away into the distance. Like one long, continuous train.

His presentation was in twenty minutes.

The driver behind him honked their horn.

“That’s not going to help,” Dennis said glancing at his rear view. The man was red-faced and shouting. Mute behind the windshield.

The traffic light went green. The queue had not moved. Dennis took his foot off the brake, edged forward half a metre, and then eased his foot down. The car behind him honked again.

“What do you want me to do?” Dennis shouted, twisting around in his seat. “I’ll just fly out of your way should I?”

The man’s expression changed. His brow furrowing, not in anger, but disbelief. His tirade of mouthed insults ending with three words easily lip-read: *What the f-?*

It took a second for Dennis to realise why.

The man and his car were sinking out of view through the rear windshield. In fact, so was the rest of the traffic. Dennis peered out the window as he continued to rise above the highway. The shadow of his car down there on the blacktop, getting smaller.

Eventually the car settled into a steady hover. He had cleared the powerlines and was looking down upon the rooves of the nearby houses. A patchwork quilt of terracotta tiles, colourbond and solar panels.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Dennis muttered. A mantra.

He gripped the steering wheel, white-knuckled, and touched his foot to the accelerator. The engine thrummed and his tires spun uselessly, but nonetheless the car sailed forward. Willed on by something more powerful than traction.

He pressed down the brake and the car's flight halted. Despite the nervous seething in his gut, Dennis realised he was grinning. Adrenaline electric through his veins. He accelerated again, this time shifting the steering wheel left and right. The car banked agreeably.

He floated by the site of the accident. The front of the first car was caved in. Steam and smoke hissing from the bonnet. The second had a shattered rear window, glass dusting the asphalt. The two drivers were standing off like gunslingers. They stared as Dennis soared overhead. Mouths frozen open mid-accusation.

The air whistling through the window gap was fresh. Alpine. Dennis took a deep breath. His hangover was already feeling better.

"Well," Dennis said to no-one. "I guess I can do magic now."

"So let's pretend that you aren't having a complete psychotic breakdown," Ernie was leaning on the benchtop in the tearoom, stirring sugar into his instant coffee. "Explain to me how it works."

"I don't really know," Dennis replied. "When I want something to happen, it happens. Just like-"

"Magic," Ernie interjected. "Yeah you already said."

Dennis waved his hand.

"Explain this to me then," Ernie said. "You said there were people who saw your car flying."

"Sure, everyone who was there must have."

"So how come it isn't all over the news? Why isn't there a youtube video going viral right now?"

"Maybe that's part of the magic," Dennis said. "Maybe people forget about it afterwards."

Ernie grinned over his coffee. "I don't get it, what's your punchline here, Den?"

"No punchline. I just wonder if I should go and see a doctor or something."

"You should definitely go and see a doctor."

By the microwave there was a vase of old flowers. Their stems drooping and the petals shrivelled and browning with rot. Through the cut glass Dennis could see the water was scumming. He put his hand on the vase. Ernie watched, sipping his coffee.

He squeezed the glass. Nothing happened.

"You gonna pull a rabbit out of that or something?" Ernie asked.

The dead flowers were daffodils. They reminded Dennis of Amy. His first gift to her had been a bouquet of daffodils and he bought them for her every anniversary... or at least those he remembered.

The wilted flowers began to rise. Like some sort of animal craning their long necks. The languished petals blooming buttery yellow.

"There," Dennis said triumphantly. "You see?"

"Do I see what?"

"The flowers," Dennis said. Holding up his hands to the daffodils. "I fixed them. I brought them back to life. See?"

"They were already like that," Ernie said. He rolled his eyes and took his coffee to the door. "Let me know when you come up with a funnier joke," he said over his shoulder as he walked out.

Dennis plucked a flower from the vase.

Maybe she will forgive me?

When he came home, Amy was sitting at the dinner table. Forking up spaghetti from a plate. An empty wine glass not far from her hand.

"There's more in the pot if you want it," she said without looking at him.

"Listen," Dennis said slipping into the seat opposite her. "About last night."

"I cleaned up the mess you left," she said coldly.

"Yeah. Shit. Thank you," Dennis said. "I was going to do it when I got home."

She chewed a mouthful of spaghetti, watching him. He looked away.

"I just want to talk about what you said," he said. "About us. Having a break."

"Believe it or not Dennis, but getting drunk and passing out on the couch hasn't done much to change my mind."

"I want to try to make things better," he said. "I want to be better."

"Dennis," she said sadly. "It's been like this for twelve years. We've had this conversation before."

"Things are different now."

She twirled another clump of noodles onto her fork.

"They really are," he insisted. "I can do mag-" he paused. "I closed the sale with Redino today. Biggest contract this year."

Her eyes were tired, creased at the corners. But even so, she smiled for him. She couldn't help herself. "That's really great," she said. "Congratulations."

"There's a huge bonus on the commission," he said. "I can get the air conditioner fixed. We could go away for the weekend."

"Dennis, you know that isn't the problem."

"I'm trying here," he said. "Can you at least acknowledge that?"

Amy had put her fork down and she lowered her face into her hands.

"I mean twelve years, Amy. You said it yourself," he said. "That has to be worth fighting for. Why do you want to give up so easy?"

She looked up from her hands. Sharply. Her eyes slashing at him. "Do you think any of this is easy for me?" She pushed her chair back, its feet grating on the tiles.

"I got you a flower," he blurted. He held out the daffodil. "Your favourite."

She sighed and all of her anger seemed to be expelled with the breath. She crossed the room and placed a hand on his cheek. He had not thought so many emotions could dance upon one person's face. In the subtle shift of an eyebrow. The tremble of a lower lip.

"Thank you, Dennis. It's beautiful," she said. "But tulips are my favourite."

After Amy retreated to her room (*their* room, he was not sure when he had stopped thinking of it so), he stayed awake. He had always been able to find a cure for insomnia on the bargain shelf of the bottle store. But that night he found his restlessness was useful.

He did not know from where his power had come. Or why. But now he knew exactly what he would use it to accomplish. Now he had a mission.

Amy woke to a scent thick and sweet in the morning air, like honey in tea. She padded down the stairs in her bathrobe. On the hallway shelf she found the perfume's source. A vase of brilliant yellow tulips.

She found more as she ventured through the house. Orange tulips on the mantelpiece. Red on the living room cabinet. Purple on the countertop.

Dennis was waiting in the kitchen, standing behind her chair at the table. The plate set before him was covered with a silver cloche.

Where on earth had he gotten a cloche?

He grinned and lifted the dome. Beneath was a steaming, hot breakfast. Sausage and scrambled eggs and mushrooms and beans. Hot buttered toast. And was that garnish parsley? She could not recall the last time he had cooked a meal for her that was not twice-flipped pork chops.

"Sit, sit," he said drawing the chair back for her.

"How did you-" she trailed off, looking around. The house had been cleaned. Deep cleaned. The carpets steamed and the tiles mopped. Every surface gleaming. "I didn't hear anything last night."

"I told you, things are different now," Dennis said. "Anytime you need something, I'll snap my fingers and make it happen."

She smiled. But the expression faltered. "This is lovely Dennis," she said. "But I need to tell you something."

“Whatever it is,” Dennis interjected. “You can tell me over dinner.” He flicked his wrist and two tickets appeared betwixt his thumb and forefinger. “A table for two at the comedy club. For tonight’s show. Degustation included.”

“I’m leaving town,” she said.

There was a pause as her words knifed through the space between them.

“No,” he said quietly.

“Yes, Dennis. I’m moving in with Jeanne, until I find my own place.”

“No,” he repeated. Louder this time. “I can still fix this, Amy. Just believe in me a little.”

“Nothing can fix this,” she said. “There’s nothing left to fix.”

She left her breakfast there on the table. Cooling like a doused coal.

The staff meeting had dragged on for two hours and no end was in sight.

Twenty of them were crammed around the committee room table. Dennis sat with his head bowed, pretending to read the printout. Every now and then, Ernie would kick him under the table. When his disinterest became too noticeable. Or he’d been asked a question.

He was lost in thoughts of Amy. Thinking of ways to change her mind. Fantasising about them succeeding.

What if I tried to quit drinking? What if I told her about the magic?

He felt a stinging rap on his shin. The pointed toe of an oxford brogue. He glared at Ernie, but his irritation melted away. *I wonder what she’s doing right now?*

Around him, the meeting room blurred away and a new room coalesced. Their bedroom. His swivel chair substituted for a seat on the windowsill. Amy was rifling through her clothes in the closet. On the bed a suitcase was splayed open, already half-packed with folded clothes.

Another sharp kick to the shin. He was back in the meeting room. Ernie stared at him with a crooked frown.

I need to get out of here.

Dennis rubbed his fingers together and somewhere behind the drywall two wires touched. Exposed copper sizzling and sparking. A wisp of smoke curled out of the vents and a caustic stench, like chlorine, began to build in the room. The others looked at each other in confusion and waved their folders like fans. The fire alarm broke.

Dennis snatched his coat from the back of his chair. He was the first out the door, skipping down the stairs as the others formed an orderly line.

“You’re not supposed to panic,” Ernie called after him.

She was loading her bags into the car when he pulled up on the kerb outside their house. He jumped out before his car had even rolled to a stop. As he marched up the driveway, the warning signal was blaring in protest. He'd left the keys in the ignition and the door open.

She saw him coming and slammed the boot shut. Her chin raised defiantly. "I thought you had that leadership meeting," she said.

She had planned this. Planned to leave while I was at work.

"Fire alarm," he said. "Whole building got evacuated."

"A fire?"

"Nothing serious."

She had edged around to the driver door and she opened it and slid inside. He took a hold of the frame to prevent her closing it.

"So... want to tell me what's going on?"

"I just thought it would be easier this way," she said. "Tear off the bandaid."

She tugged on the door and he let it slide from his hand. They stared at each other through the smoked glass. Her eyes softened and the window rolled down.

"You weren't even going to say goodbye?" he said.

"I didn't think you'd let me."

She started the engine and he placed his hand against the car door. He flexed. Not with muscles of fibre and nerve, but of will and spirit. The engine sputtered and the car gave one spasmodic heave before falling silent.

Amy slapped the steering wheel with both hands. "Goddammit!"

"Maybe this is a sign," he said.

She turned the key in the ignition. It whirred feebly. Hacked like an old man coughing.

"Maybe the world wants us to give it another go."

"I'll call a taxi," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Just talk to me."

She held her phone to her ear. "Hello? Yes, I need to ride."

He squeezed his fist and a gust of wind rustled through the tree leaves.

"Yes, from this location..." she was saying. She pulled the phone away and looked at the screen. Then put it back to her ear. "Hello?"

"So you won't even talk to me?"

She put the dead phone down on the dashboard and ran a hand through her curls.

"Why do you hate me?" he said.

"I don't hate you, Dennis," she said. "I just don't love you anymore."

He stood there, chewing on nothing. Finally silenced.

"But I will," she said. "God help me, I will hate you if this continues."

Dennis realised that his nails were biting into his palm. He relaxed his fist.

“Is that what you want?” she asked.

“Try again,” he said.

“What?”

“The car. There’s a trick with the key, just give it a little wiggle.”

She eyed him sideways, but did as he said and the engine rumbled to life.

They were both crying now. For different reasons.

He watched as she reversed out of the driveway and rolled away down the road. She stared back through the window. Neither of them waved. The car came to the corner and then she was gone. Off to the freeway and a new chapter in life.

He stood there a while longer. Hands hanging loosely by his side. Electricity flickering between his fingertips.

He was pondering all the ways magic could change the world.

And all the ways it could not.