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Magic

Meagan Perry

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Magic

All three girls hunched intently over Lizzie's phone. They appeared to have almost stopped breathing, caught up in wonder. It wasn't the gathering Anne would have wanted for her own twelfth birthday, but Lizzie seemed more than content at the centre of the celebration, scrunched between her newest friend Thalia and her younger sister Emma. Anne admired the tumble of girls, almost not believing two of them were hers. There was so much bright energy and focus in them. *I must have looked like that sometime.* Emma turned her bright face up toward her older sister just as Lizzie turned her gaze from the phone to Anne.

"Mom is that you?"

Hearing her daughter's disbelief in every syllable, Anne braced herself. Lizzie had taken to challenging her mother at every opportunity, wondering aloud if Anne knew anything at all, yet also somehow expecting Anne to understand Lizzie's every thought and feeling. It was hard to be patient.

"I'm not sure," answered Anne, outwardly calm. "I don't know what you're looking at."

She walked over behind the couch to see what Lizzie had asked about, and curled over the girls like a gargoyle.

Sure enough, there she was, blurrily reproduced from nineties television, sawed in half and smiling. John, her boss at the time, was there too, holding up a large and showy saw. Anne wasn't surprised to see the video, but she was amazed that the girls had found the clip so quickly.

John had called the day before to say he was putting some old clips online, asking if he could tag her in them. Feeling old and glad to hear his voice on the end of the line, she agreed right away and now—*alakazam*—there she was.

"Yeah that's me," she told the girls.

Lizzie squinted from the screen back to Anne, comparing.

"Wow," said an impressed Emma. Lizzie was a bit more distant.

"That's cool," she said.

Thalia didn't hold back.

"That's awesome!"

She grabbed the phone away from the other two, restarting the video as soon as it ended.

Anne felt a burst of pride. With that video available, the next time she told another mom at school that her first job title was "magician's assistant," she'd be able to wipe the skeptical stares off their bland faces. She could hardly wait to bust out her phone on Monday.

Anne watched Lizzie measure Thalia's enthusiasm up. Lizzie had trouble keeping her friends, she was quick to judge, and today's invitation was an audition for Thalia, who was clearly fascinated and had a lot of questions.

"When did you do that?" asked Thalia. It was great to see so much interest.

"Well, judging by the fashions that must have been the 90s," she said.

The girls missed her sarcasm. They nodded solemnly, examining Anne's teased hair and apple cheeks, as though they had just received an important secret.

Anne's young self lay paused on the screen, her head poking out from the end of one box, her mouth smiling broadly while her legs protruded from a matching container that John was parading around at some distance from her.

"That was my summer job after high school," she told the girls.

"Did it hurt?" asked Thalia.

"A little," said Anne. Thalia's eyes widened, and Anne relented.

"No silly, it was magic. It didn't hurt."

"Show it again, Liz," said Thalia.

Lizzie was definitely less interested in this than Thalia, but she tapped the start of the video and they were back at the beginning. Young Anne traversed the stage once more, on her way to be sliced. They all watched it through. To forestall a fourth watching and an impatient outburst from her eldest, Anne decided to call a halt to the spectacle with a distraction.

"Who wants cake?"

The girls raised their heads: "Me me me," they peeped attentively like hungry chicks before they ducked back down to the screen, their attentions pulled to the next item down the internet rabbit hole.

Anne hurried to the fridge to get the cake she had made for her Lizzie. It was a classic birthday cake, chocolate with white icing.

Manoeuvring the cake off the bottom shelf, she rammed it against corner of a plastic container full of pasta salad, tearing off a big chunk of icing. The cake's fluffy innards were revealed. Anne sighed. Any attempt to fix up that icing would be a disaster, there would be crumbs across the whole thing. Instead she shook some sprinkles on top, candled the cake and spun it so the flaw faced her instead of the girls. She would slice the broken piece away before there was time to notice it, and devour it herself.

Anne held the cake high and marched into the dining room, where the girls had materialized at the table, Lizzie and Thalia side-by-side, with Emma hunkered down in her dad's usual spot at the end of the table as she always did when he was away.

Cake carefully placed, and candles lit, Anne gave the nod, and Emma started up a piping chorus of happy birthday. Anne joined in as best she could. She was no singer. Thalia's enthusiastic rendition brought it all together. Lizzie graciously accepted the song with a shy smile. When the last note faded, Lizzie blew out all the candles in a single breath, Thalia giggled "no boyfriends," and Anne cut each girl a perfect slice of cake, sliding her own quickly off to the side.

"Did you ever learn any tricks?" asked Thalia, blowing a crumb of cake from her lip to the tabletop along with the question. She was clearly glad to have an opportunity to talk more about the video.

"Of course I did," said Anne.

"You did?" asked Lizzie. She wanted to know too, but probably would not have asked the question herself. Anne hoped Thalia would be invited to come back again soon.

"True story," said Anne. "Maybe I'll show you."

She swallowed the damaged piece of cake. Lizzie did not look convinced that Anne could actually show them anything. She had her lips pressed together and her head tilted to the side. Her eyebrows were raised just a little. She looked a lot like her dad in that moment. Lizzie's skepticism wasn't surprising; as far as her kids knew, Anne was a regular mom doing regular things, happily enough. Why should the girl believe?

In the minutes that followed, while the girls talked about magic, that they had seen or imagined, Anne started to panic a little. She hadn't

practiced any of those magic tricks in ages. She left the show after one summer. That video had been shot more than twenty years ago.

When they were done it was Thalia who asked.

“Can you do a trick for us now?”

Anne nodded.

“After I get these dishes into the kitchen. You girls go play.”

Anne was now a mom in trouble. Six bright eyes sparkled with youthful excitement as they watched her head back to the kitchen with the dishes. She stood in the kitchen, remembering herself at 17, when she saw the ad for a summer job with a magic show and applied. Her friends thought she was crazy. Would her parents let her travel the county alone with a *magician*? She told them yes, but the truth was that her parents said no.

Then her dad lost his job. It changed his mind. He said she could do it if a parent was there to supervise, and he had the time. He spent the summer accompanying her to county fairs, applying for jobs in nearby towns when they passed through, and practicing amateur sleight of hand at the back of community halls. He had a lot of time to kill while she helped set up and tear down. Her dad told John he could do some of that work, but John didn't want to pay a roadie. That summer, Anne handed her cheques over to her parents for food and gas. At the time, her dad's attention had felt like a burden. Now that Anne had a daughter of her own, she understood why he wanted to be there.

While she reminisced, Anne disappeared the plates and cups into the already crammed dishwasher and started to fill the sink. As the water rose in the basin, she skillfully balanced the remaining dishes into an improbably tall pile: mixing bowls, pots, and cake tin. She swirled her hand gracefully through the suds, ending with a flourish. Tada. Housework.

Chatters and giggles from the other room washed pleasantly over her as she submerged a mixing bowl, eavesdropping. Her three minutes of fame were being picked apart in there like it was the moon landing.

“Can you believe your mom did that?” said Thalia.

“No,” said Lizzie. “That can't be her in that box. Look, her hair is a different colour and she's too short.”

Anne sighed. She would have to deliver on this trick thing. She placed a third bowl upside down in the drying rack and headed for the basement,

reaching back through boxes of camping gear, old yearbooks and objects destined for regifting.

She found it more quickly than she thought she would; it was in a smaller box than the rest, which were packed together tightly against the back wall. She had labelled its side with the words “Amazing Anne” in her showy, teenaged cursive.

Adult Anne pulled the box out of the stack without dislodging the larger ones, leaving a cube of empty air behind. She could tap it back into place when her trick was over.

Open, the box was less than half full; it held a tiny collapsible wand, a deck of cards, and a few of her dad’s old magic tricks nestled in her old cape. She tapped the wand against the box, half expecting a bird or bunny to emerge. Her dad’s favorite trick had always been the fake thumb tip into which you shoved a very delicate silk scarf. With the thumb tip closely fitted over your own thumb, you could show an empty hand to the audience, cover your fist, then reach in to extract the scarf from the fake thumb. Executed properly, the trick made it seem like the magician was drawing the scarf out of an empty hand.

Her dad went all in at the magic store where he bought it, springing for a tricolour scarf, red, blue and yellow, and the most realistic thumb, matching it to his skin tone.

“Extravagant,” he’d said, wiggling his eyebrows.

A skilled professional or practiced amateur could master the trick; it was simple and sure to impress. She and her dad had been pretty good at it by the end of the summer tour. Anne grabbed the thumb and its scarf out of the box, tucked the trick into her pocket, and headed back upstairs.

The girls were still in high spirits. They had more questions. Emma called out to Anne, “Mom, how did they cut you in half?” and Anne answered her that they did it with a knife and the girls looked down at their tummies, like much younger children.

“We’ve been watching your video trying to see how you did it,” said Thalia.

“If it was for real,” mumbled Lizzie.

“Will you tell us how?” continued unsuppressible Thalia.

“A magician,” replied Anne, “Never shows their tricks or talks about how they do their tricks. It’s a rule.”

Her memory conjured the gasps and cheers that accompanied John's dramatic saw work as she lay in the box, smiling hard. She also remembered the slight but always present fear that the trick might not work, that she might actually get chopped.

The girls begged her to tell and she demurred, first gracefully, then firmly. She walked back to the kitchen, slipping the false thumb over her own as she went.

When she appeared with juice a few minutes later they barely looked up.

"Why did you want to get sawed in half, anyway?" asked Thalia, reaching for the juice but keeping her eyes on the screen.

"It was more interesting than working at the supermarket," said Anne. "And I got a sparkly outfit."

"Oh," said the girl, clearly not realizing that sparkly outfits were not very easy to come by back then.

Anne was eager to break out her trick so she stood in front of them, waiting for their attention. They were, for some reason, concentrating on their juice. *It's just juice, girls*, thought Anne before she broke into their reverie.

"Oh gosh, something is going on with my hand," she said loudly. "Hmmm," she added. All the girls looked up, curious, maybe a little worried. She was committed.

Anne spread her fingers wide on the unthumbed hand, moving it back and forth rapidly across the girls' field of vision, then rubbed her palms together.

"Ready for some magic?"

They all nodded, Lizzie a little more slowly than the others. All of this felt like it was coming out a little too loudly. It was awkward. Anne pressed on.

Lizzie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, put her cup down and settled back with her phone.

Two out of three, thought Anne, and focused on the trick. She had shown them the empty hand, now she would grab the scarf and draw it out. She reached into her fist and twisted her fingers around trying to coax the scarf out of its hiding spot. She had definitely tucked the scarf too far into the plastic thumb, a rookie mistake that would cost her the girls' attention. It was taking ages.

Thalia's eyes dimmed in disappointment, but then Anne managed to dislodge one silk corner from the thumb tip. There. She cupped her hand as though it held a small animal, pulled out the tip of the scarf so it peeked from the top of her fist. *I should make a surprised face*, she reminded herself, and did. She showed the scarf, *not too close*, to each girl in turn, doing her best to ignore Lizzie's polite, but distant, smile.

Anne offered her hand to Lizzie to emphasize the reveal, then asked Thalia to reach over and hold the scarlet end of the fabric tightly. With Thalia as her loyal assistant, Anne stepped backwards away from the girls, saying "goodness me what is going on?" as the scarf stretched between her them.

Lizzie was still giving Anne the most annoyingly casual of glances over her phone.

The other two, however, were hers. They had leaned forward, Thalia gripping the end of the scarf and Emma clearly trying to figure out how Anne was doing this. The blue section of the scarf revealed itself, then finally the yellow. The fabric slipped out of Anne's cupped hand and drifted to the floor.

Thalia and Emma, shared meaningful tween stares, but Lizzie leaned even further back on the couch. Anne decided to end with a flourish, and delivered a graceless pirouette, narrowly avoiding bashing her leg the corner of the coffee table.

She tucked the plastic thumb tip into her bra then twirled back to face her audience. Then she took a long, deep bow that strained the backs of her thighs. She straightened, winded, as Emma jumped off the couch away from the limp and seemingly hypnotized Lizzie.

Emma stood with Anne, chest out, one arm in the air like a ringmaster. "Ladies and gentlemen," she hollered, "My mom!"

Lizzie didn't even look up.

Thalia smiled and made a silent clapping gesture then a fist pump. Anne bent to pick up the scarf up from the ground, forever the cleaner. She turned back to the kitchen.

"Hey mom?" said Lizzie.

Thalia and Lizzie were back at the phone, and Emma had cuddled up to it too. *It never ends*, thought Anne.

"Do you want to see your trick? I made a video."