The Hindu Shuffle

Matt Valentine
With a paper napkin, Howard wipes coffee rings and sugar from the tabletop. “This was one of Gary’s favorites,” he says.

He folds a five-dollar bill in half lengthwise, creases it, and sets it on the table. He scoots my glass of iced tea aside to give me a better view. His fingers, hooked like talons, clutch the air above the bill in an affectation of intense effort. Slowly, the folded bill begins to levitate.

I can’t see the fine thread that lifts it from the table. Maybe there is no thread—maybe there is a magnet. Or a weak field of static electricity, manipulated somehow by the old magician. I don’t know how the trick works, but I know that there is a trick, and I am unimpressed.

A child of three or four watches us from the adjacent booth. He gnaws absently on the vinyl upholstery, but his eyes are transfixed by the cash floating in midair. Howard brings his hands together, crushing the bill, then spreads his fingers to show that it has vanished. He lifts his gray bushy eyebrows. “That’s a five-dollar trick,” he says. “Want to see a ten-dollar trick?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Give me a ten-dollar bill.”

He folds my bill meticulously three times, then puts it in his breast pocket and pats it gently. “That was a ten-dollar trick. Want to see a twenty-dollar trick?”

I frown at him admonishingly, but he doesn’t offer to return my money. From our seat near the window in the coffee shop, I can see the Tribune Building across the street. The owners will be coming to the staff meeting today. I am ineligible for the buyout, but I’m curious about who will take the money and volunteer to leave. I’d like to see that prick Waldo Liu pack his spalted maple desk, but I know he’ll stick around, chasing the Pulitzer that has evaded him, unfairly, for decades.

Liu could leave the paper and go directly to a tenured teaching position at Stanford or Columbia or Texas. But he’ll stay. Next week, he’ll finish his series about the four prison inmates—all
lifers—released by the state with apologies after a class of eager law school students dipped into court records and found glaring evidence that the convicts had been railroaded by a racist prosecutor in a racist town with a racist judge. Seamlessly integrated into Liu’s professionally dispassionate prose, a nuanced, subtly persuasive lexicon reveals the reporter as more than merely an observer. Liu isn’t just recounting the story—he’s taken up a cause. And by reading his articles, the reader, too, shares a solidarity with these “unassuming” young people, these “conscientious” law students, these “principled” twenty-two-year-old men and women with perfect teeth and perfect tits and “promising” futures, smiling in self-satisfaction in Tee-shirts and jeans, or DU sweatpants and baseball caps, or blazers and ties, in a multiethnic huddle in front of an anachronistic blackboard in a big color photograph on A1. I suspect that Liu is sleeping with one or more of them, but I’m not sure which. He seems to me simultaneously lascivious and benign—the kind of person who would be an excellent family man, but with more than one family.

“Dude’s got a pervy handshake,” my girlfriend, Bunny, said after she met Liu at a cocktail party. “He smiled at me like he knows what kind of panties I’m wearing.”

The class of law school heroes is Liu’s latest, gushy, consequential story. My story is about this turd—a septuagenarian who has just conned me out of ten dollars. I crunch the last ice from my tea. “Ready?”

Howard drives a white, late 90s Crown Victoria with black fenders and a push bumper. It looks like a police cruiser, which is what it used to be.

“I bought it from the university auction,” he tells me. “The campus cops retire these things when they hit 200-thousand miles, even if there’s nothing wrong with them.” He coasts along I-25, only tapping the accelerator occasionally as the cruiser loses momentum. Ahead of him, cars doing sixty slow to fifty-five. The highway seems calmed.

He hasn’t shaved in a day or two, and his untied bowtie and unbuttoned shirt collar make him look like the grandfather of a bride, disheveled after a long night at the reception. He is thin.
Loose skin hangs below his chin and in concentric crescents under his eyes. His long ears have been stretched by gravity, and the lobes dangle like earrings.

“I don’t usually do kiddie shows,” he says. “I’m only doing this one because they really wanted me—they said they wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

He looks at me to confirm that I have understood.

“Kids just want to figure out the trick,” he says. “They’ll rush up and grab your stuff, try to see how it works. They’ll break it. They don’t know how to just enjoy the show. Kids’ shows are terrible. Universally terrible.” Reconsidering, he corrects himself. “This one will be good, though. I brought some special things. Some classic illusions.”

This sort of fluff story is all I’m trusted with, now that I’ve been banished from features and entertainment reviews. In the whole country, I am the only critic at a major newspaper to have said anything positive about *Evil Mummies II*. I gave the movie a C+, but the DVD box cover now boasts, “in the tradition of *Cleopatra* and *The Ten Commandments*, *Evil Mummies II* capitalizes on a romantic fantasy of Old Testament Egypt. —Denver Tribune.”

Howard isn’t the primary subject of my article. I’m spending the day with him to get his stories about his late partner, Gary Martinez (“The Great Kel-Mec”). Howard and Gary had a casino show together in Vegas for a decade. They split up when PBS offered Gary a hosting gig for an after-school show about science and pseudoscience. He debunked quacks and psychics by duplicating their seemingly supernatural feats and then revealing the tricks he’d used to create the illusion. A group of magicians attacked him for spilling secrets of the trade. They banned him from several societies and filed a class action lawsuit. He filed his own countersuit, claiming some of his critics had harassed him with racial epithets and threats of violence. Mortified by the controversy, the network cancelled his show.

“When you and Gary got back together, what kind of venues did you work? Private parties?”

“Trade shows. Birthday shows. We did the governor’s
birthday. We did a mobster’s birthday once. Big fat Italian guy. He said he could make us disappear.”

“Jeez,” I say.

“When we get there,” Howard says, “We better tell them you’re my son. The parents will get nervous if we tell them you’re a reporter. If we tell them you’re my assistant, they’ll think we’re a couple of queers.”

The house is way out in Castle Pines. It’s a new construction behemoth with three levels of composite decking wrapped around the back, and ten-foot tall windows with a view of the Rockies. A twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl runs across the yard and past our car, pursued by a boy shooting video of her with a cell phone. She stops short, momentarily confused by the ersatz police cruiser, and while she grins at us, embarrassed, the boy grabs her by the waist, flings her over his shoulder, and carries her back to the party. She flails her arms and legs, squealing gleefully.

“Here we go,” Howard sighs. “Rich little shit punks.”

Round banquet tables with centerpieces of cut flowers have been arranged in a U-shape in the lawn around a small stage. Yellow balloons, each printed with the name of a different child, are tied to the back of every chair in lieu of a place card. A DJ in a silver zoot suit bobs enthusiastically to the beat of resampled pop. Ignoring the assigned seating, the forty or fifty kids in attendance have clustered at the distant corner of the property, away from the decorations and music. There are no parents.

I help myself to a tumbler of lemonade from the buffet while Howard sets up his props. From the trunk of the Crown Victoria, he unloads two cardboard boxes overflowing with silks and feathers and polished chrome spheres. He digs through these, looking for something that he doesn’t find. Stepping behind a tree, he unzips his pants to tuck in his tuxedo shirt. He runs a cordless electric razor over his face.

A nervous-looking woman in a black skirt asks me how long until he’s ready. She’s holding a clipboard and a pen and has a cell phone on a lanyard around her neck.

“Pretty soon, I think.”

“I’m Stephanie, the event coordinator,” she says. “I know I

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told him on the phone that this would be a party for children eight to ten—the birthday boy is nine, but most of the guests here are his brother's classmates and they're older. So he might need to—I don't know—modify his act for an older audience. Make it hipper.”


She waits for me to say something more, and when I don't, she asks. “Are you...his assistant?”

“I'm his boyfriend.”

“Right,” she says. She looks at her clipboard, as if there might be a note there about the magician's companion. “Will you need a plate for dinner?”

I shake my head and wink at her. She pauses, confused, and then gives me a professional smile.

Howard joins us. He has somehow transformed himself from a tottering old bum into a foppish gentleman. His beaver top hat glints blue in the fading sunlight. “A rose for the lady,” he says, affecting a mid-Atlantic accent. He brushes the tip of his magic wand across Stephanie's silk lapel and a blossom of dyed-red feathers appears there. He bows deeply at the waist.

“Oh!” Stephanie chortles politely. “How lovely.” She pokes at the fake flower. “How is this...attached? Is this a fishhook? How do I get this off?”

“You may keep your rose—a token of my appreciation,” Howard says magnanimously.

For a moment, Stephanie seems about to lose her temper. Exasperated, she says “we really need to start the show soon. I was explaining to your friend that the boys and girls in attendance are somewhat older than I had expected. Will that be a problem?”

“The situation is completely under my control.” He says, as if implanting a hypnotic suggestion.

“Wonderful,” she says. “I'll ask the DJ to announce you now.”

I take a seat at an empty table as the DJ fades up the theme music from Rocky.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls! We are in the presence of an extraordinary guest! Impervious to fire and invulnerable to bullets, with hands faster than human vision! Possibly immortal!
A direct descendant of—" Here the DJ pauses, struggling with pronunciation, "Virgilius the Sorcerer! He's performed in New York, Las Vegas, and Paris, France! He's performed for European royalty! The one! The only! Howard the Magnificent!"

Howard steps onto the stage, his giant cape billowing loudly over a smattering of applause.

"Watch!" he commands. With thumb and index finger, he plucks an invisible hair from his own head, then pantomimes stretching it into a long rope and tying it into a complex knot. He twirls it like a lasso, then casts it high above his head. He tugs on the imaginary rope, as if he's snagged a grappling hook to the ledge of a tall building.

"Oh my god lame," one of the kids says.

He tugs again, and something seems to fall suddenly from the sky. Howard catches it and holds it cupped in his gloved hands—a live dove. He reaches into his coat, and in a movement too fast to see, he produces an impossibly large brass birdcage. He places the dove gently inside.

"Holy shit," one of the kids says. "That's effing sick." They are stoned and giggling, but they watch Howard with rapt attention.

"Watch!" Howard thunders. "Watch. Watch." He points to his wristwatch and whispers, "watch." He unbuckles the wristwatch and lays it on a small table. He covers the watch with a handkerchief. He removes his top hat, reaches into it, and produces a small hammer, with which he pulverizes the watch. Reaching again into the hat, he retrieves a tumbler filled with water—he spills a little to show us it's real. He brushes the broken bits into the tumbler and swirls the cloudy cocktail. We can see the shiny scraps of gold and we can almost hear the tinkling of the crystal shards. He throws his head back and gulps it all down.

"Fake," one of the kids says, "That's so fake."

Howard swallows dramatically, his Adam's apple bobbing. He contorts his body like a belly dancer, then opens his mouth. He reaches in with thumb and forefinger, and slowly pulls out his wristwatch, intact and—he holds it to his ear to confirm—still ticking.
The show declines. His card trick is too complex to understand—at the conclusion, he produces a King of Diamonds that has some significance I've missed. Kids begin texting on their cell phones, and gradually they wander away or talk to each other over Howard's patter. The show ends when Howard throws several props into his hat, waves a wand over it, and then turns it upside down to demonstrate that everything has disappeared. He bows to the few people remaining in the audience, then bows to his bird. He picks up the birdcage, which disappears with a clatter and a puff of smoke between his hands. I clap for him, enthusiastically, and a few of the kids join me in applause.

While we're loading his gear into the trunk, Stephanie tells us how much she enjoyed the show. There is a small ragged hole in her lapel.

"You know where to send the invoice?" she says, handing me a business card.

"I thought—" Howard begins. "I thought you would pay me today."

"We pay net thirty," Stephanie says. I hand Howard the card.

"We pay within thirty days of receiving an invoice," she explains.

"I see," Howard says. "No problem." He smiles at me like a priest at a funeral, then slaps the roof of the car. "Let's get lunch!" he says with exaggerated enthusiasm.

At McGill's bar, Howard parks in a handicapped space and fumbles in his door pocket for the blue mirror hanger.

"Arthritis," he says.

I look at the sun, still blazing in the West. "It's okay to leave your bird in the car?" I say. "In this heat?"

Howard reaches into his coat. "He won't mind," he says, tossing the tiny collapsed birdcage into my lap. Feathers and gore poke out between the bars. Howard touches a finger to his lips in a gesture of secrecy. "Tricks of the trade."

McGill's is dead empty at 5 p.m., with only one other patron, inert at the bar. The whole place is paneled in dark wood,
with dull brass accents and dim sconces in each booth along the wall. I’ve driven past the bar for years but this is my first time inside. I’m surprised they have a kitchen and table service. The waitress brings Howard a baroque cocktail—his usual, evidently.

“I’ll have the senior special,” Howard says. “Chopped steak.”

“And for your friend?” The waitress asks.

“The same,” I say.

“A full portion?”

“You can charge me full price.”

Howard sips his drink, which is the color of butterscotch and garnished with a skewer of tropical fruit. “What did you think of the show?” he asks. “I put a couple of special things in there for you—stuff I used to do at the Sands.”

“You were great,” I say. “The thing with the watch was great.”

“When we did that in Vegas, I would ask somebody in the audience to let me borrow their watch. Then Gary would smash it while I was explaining the setup for the trick, and I’d pretend to be mortified—not yet Gary! I haven’t swapped it yet! Of course everything would work out fine and the guy would get his watch back.”

“So you were Abbot and Gary was Costello?”

“I was the straight man,” Howard says. “I did all the talking. I was the brains of the operation.” He smiles broadly, revealing a partial denture stuck like white candy between his yellow teeth.

“Gary grew up in Colorado, but he was born in Monterey. His parents spoke Spanish at home. Gary was always afraid that he’d say something that sounded a little too Spanish.”

“He didn’t want people to know he was Hispanic?”

“He wasn’t dark. He had a little color. Sometimes we would say he was a gypsy. People liked that—gypsies are supposed to be good at magic and curses and mind reading. But who ever heard of a Mexican magician?”

In my web search on Gary Martinez, I’d found some scans of the oldest posters from the Vegas years: Tommy’s Steakhouse at Algier’s Casino, featuring tableside psychic tricks by the devilish duo, Howdeeni and Kel-Mec! Discounting the yellowing paper, Gary’s complexion in the illustration was as pale as his tuxedo shirt. He
wore a thick Teutonic mustache and combed his hair straight back to emphasize a sharp widow’s peak.

“My grandmother says my beard makes me look Arab,” I say. “She wants me to get rid of it so I don’t look like a terrorist. I told her it’s not the beard that makes me look Arab. It’s the genes I inherited from her. She’s one-hundred-percent Lebanese.

“You’re half Arab?” Howard asks, incredulous.

“A quarter.”

Howard scrutinizes me, deciding whether or not he believes this genealogy. “I like the beard. What do the ladies think?”

“My girlfriend thinks it makes me look Jewish.”

“So why don’t you shave?”

“No—that’s a good thing. Bunny says that’s why she went out with me in the first place.”

“That’s what turns her on? How long have you been seeing this girl?”

“Two years.”

Howard shakes his head and shrugs.

I try to segue back to the interview. “It must have been a big deal to split up the act with Gary. After sixteen years together.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you must have been close,” I say.

Something about Howard changes, just at this moment. His mood sours. “What kind of question is that? Is that what you’re going to write in your newspaper story? ‘They were close? Come on.’” He regards me contemptuously while the waitress sets out our meals. I devote my attention to the food for several long seconds.

When he can see that I’m not going to defend or retract my question, Howard says, “Eventualities precipitate.” He saws off a big bite of steak and slathers it with mashed potatoes. “That means ‘shit happens.’” He continues talking with his mouth full. “He got his show. Then he got married.”

At the mention of marriage my mind skips to a lurid vision of Bunny. A few nights earlier, she had commanded me to sit on the bed while she disappeared into the closet with a shopping bag. From behind the closed door, she prattled off the details of a plan she’d hatched for our future: I would abandon my failing career
in journalism and apply to law school. It would be okay for us to marry, she said, before I finished my JD, but we’d wait to start a family until I had secured a position at a firm—preferably in the south, because she didn’t like winter weather. She said she’d help me study for the LSAT, and reward good scores on practice tests with blowjobs. She stepped out of the closet wearing nothing but white garters and stockings, white heels and a bridal veil. “Spectacular blow jobs,” she said. “Let me demonstrate.”

I don’t love Bunny. I don’t like that she leaves her marijuana in my freezer; I don’t like that men stop her on the street or in the grocery store or in lobbies or parking lots or on the bus to ask how she’s been, and to suggest, affably, that they should catch up soon. Mostly, though, what I feel toward Bunny is a dull resentment, because she’s cheerful most of the time without any reason or right to be so happy. I had been happy earlier in life—justifiably happy—but the circumstances of that happiness had seemed, for a long time now, irretrievable. I cannot imagine myself as a lawyer. But Bunny’s plan, in comparison to my own unarticulated plan (which is to continue writing for the Tribune until I am laid off or the paper is shuttered) seems the more prudent option. That night I lifted her veil and kissed her deeply as I pulled her onto the bed.

I watch Howard eat for several minutes, fascinated by the mess he’s making on the table. “What were you up to?” I ask. “While Gary’s show was on the air? What did you do?”

“I did our act,” Howard says. “Solo.”

“Where? In Vegas?”

“Here,” he says. “I came home. Mother was sick.”

Howard gestures with his empty glass to the waitress across the room. “I’m dry,” he says. “You should have one, too.”

“I guess I was confused about that. It’s not a big deal. But you were both in Vegas, and then he got the TV show, which filmed in Denver. So he moved out here. And then you moved out here, too.”

“I’m from Denver,” Howard says, a little sharply. “This is my hometown.”

The waitress arrives with the drink and leans over me to reach across the large table. Her cleavage presses pleasantly against
my shoulder for a moment while she sets the fresh cocktail on a napkin and collects the empty glass and empty plates.

“You want one?” Howard asks.

“What is it?”

“Sprite and scotch with some sugar.”

“We call it the Fabulous Howard,” the waitress offers.

“I’d better not,” I say.

“Did you know, miss,” Howard asks the waitress, “That this place has an infestation of fleas?”

She takes a minute step backward, as if Howard himself might be infested.

“They’re quite harmless,” he says. “Domesticated. I’ve been training them, in fact.”

He nods down at the tabletop and beckons with one hand. His other hand, I notice, is out of sight under the table. The saltshaker wobbles, then haltingly advances toward him. “Thank you,” he says to the invisible fleas. He holds up the saltshaker. “Table service. They might be after your job.”


I catch Howard peeling the stick-on magnet from the bottom of the saltshaker, but I don’t say anything. “How would you describe your relationship with Gary?” I ask.

“We worked together a long time.”

“Did he talk to you about the lawsuits?”

“No.”

Howard produces a deck of cards and begins to shuffle them in elaborate cascades, riffling them on the table and between his hands.

“How did he feel about the show getting cancelled? Was he angry at the network?”

“We didn’t talk about that.” He fans the cards face down on the table. “Pick one,” he says.

My cell phone chirps. I glance at the text from Bunny: Where the F RU? I tap one of the cards with my finger and Howard flips it over. The three of clubs.

“I mean later, after you were partnered up again.”

“We didn’t talk about it.” Howard buries my card in the
deck and shuffles, reshuffles. He deals me one card from the top of the deck. The three of clubs. He deals me a hand: four of clubs, five of clubs, six of clubs, seven of clubs.

The waitress brings the check. “Dessert?” she asks.

“I think we’re done,” I say, reaching for my wallet.

“Perhaps you can make some change for me,” Howard says. “I have a hundred dollar bill that’s been burning a hole in my pocket.” He opens his wallet, and foot-high flames jump out of it, capped by one puff of dark black smoke.

The intense bleating of the fire alarm is so overwhelming that I can barely hear the waitress shouting and cursing as she steps over me onto the upholstered bench. I turn away from her tight gray skirt, which is pressed into my shoulder. She climbs onto the table, shielding one ear with her free hand and waving her notepad in front of a sprinkler head, trying to dissipate the smoke that has already cleared.

“Can I help?” I shout. “Should we call somebody?”

“Just go,” she screams.

“That’s—I don’t think that’s it!” I shout at her. “That’s not the smoke detector!”

She tries to twist the sprinkler head like a faucet knob. Instantly there’s a deluge of high-pressure spray covering our little corner of the restaurant. Howard’s eyes are tightly closed and he is covering both ears with his hands, his face in anguish. He snatches up his cards and his wallet as I usher him toward the exit.

Standing in the parking lot with a puddle forming around us, I can tell that something is wrong with him. He looks diminished—physically smaller, like a wooly dog after a bath. I ask him if he’s okay but he doesn’t make eye contact with me. He’s shivering.

“Should I take you to the doctor?” I say. “Do you need an ambulance?”

I feel for the keys in his pocket, touching him for the first time. There seems to be no body beneath his jacket, just wet clothes twisted around more wet clothes, like a wad of laundry from the washer. I help him into the passenger seat of the car.

“Do you want to go to the hospital?” I ask him. I can hear the siren of a fire truck approaching. “I think we should get out of here.”
Howard is still holding the trick wallet. He opens it, and I detect a powerful whiff of kerosene. He examines the striker, the saturated wad of cotton clipped to a metal shield inside the wallet. "Would you please take me home?" he says finally. I watch in the rearview mirror as the fire truck arrives at McGills.

A few blocks away, I ask him for directions. "Get on the highway," he says. "What's your address?"

When he doesn't respond, I glance at him and see his face turned away, his forehead pressed into the window. His hands are balled into fists on his thighs.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

For several minutes he says nothing. I drive along at the same lugubrious pace he'd established earlier. "That was my favorite restaurant," he says. "Now I can't ever go back there."

"Yeah," I say. "That sucks."

"It's your fault," he says. "Do you realize that? This whole fucked up day started with you."

One of the things I learned at Northwestern is that sometimes it's better to just let people talk, rather than to interrupt with questions. I fiddle with the air conditioning vents and the cruise control on the big sedan while Howard berates me. For the first time I feel like I'm hearing from the real person, rather than one of his affected personas. He tells me that he knows I don't care about him, that I'm only interested in Gary, and that it was an insult to be interviewed only in that context. Gary was his apprentice; Howard was the master magician. He shouldn't have to impress me. Gary had been nothing but a busboy in a Vegas restaurant when Howard met him. "He was a skinny Mexican faggot washing dishes and sucking dicks for rent money," Howard says. "I taught him how to handle cards and coins. I taught him the French Drop and the Hindu Shuffle. I taught him how to use a rubber. And when I got a show—my show—at the Sands, I told them they had to put Gary on the playbill." Howard taps his knuckle on the window and points. "This is our exit."

Howard's apartment is on the "terrace level" of a large complex populated mostly by community college students. I offer
to help him carry his boxes of props down the stairs, and he nods sharply but says nothing.

As soon as he opens the door to his apartment, an acidic odor rolls into the hallway. I imagine a spilled bottle of cologne somewhere, turning to vinegar. Howard slumps into a yellow sofa, unbalancing a tall stack of paperwork that collapses and slides onto the floor. Water drips from the cuffs of his tuxedo jacket, and thin wisps of wet hair are plastered to his forehead. His ruffled shirt is saturated and nearly transparent, revealing hidden pockets and the outline of a long spring across his chest.

“What a bitch of a day,” he says. He fumbles in his pocket for a pillbox. “Get me a glass of water?”

His tiny kitchen is barely navigable. The dishwasher and oven doors are open, and stacks of dirty dishes cover the countertops. The cupboards, also open, are empty. “Where are your glasses?” I say—loudly—but he doesn’t respond. I pick through the dirty coffee mugs and find one that looks relatively clean. One side of the sink is full of gray water, and the other is overflowing with dirty dishes. I don’t see any sponges or dish soap or scrub brushes, so I rinse the cup under the tap, fill it, and bring it to him, only to find him asleep on the couch. I watch for a moment to confirm that he’s breathing, and then I call Bunny.

“There you are!” she says, chipper. “Guess what? The doctor said everything checked out, so I’m starting hormones Wednesday.”

“That’s good,” I say.

“I’m gonna get a buttload of money when they harvest my eggs,” she says. “I could buy a new car. But I’ll probably put most of it into your tuition so we don’t have so much debt when you finish law school. I’ve got to buy something for myself, though. Something gold, like maybe a gold necklace or—Oh!—A gold toe ring! But we should definitely celebrate. What do you want? Sushi? Shushi and shexy? If you want sex—like, ordinary sex—tonight’s gonna be your last chance for a while, because if I accidentally get pregnant while I’m taking the hormones I’d have a litter. I mean, I could literally have like ten babies. And then we’d be fucked. Where are you anyway? You were supposed to call me when you were done interviewing the birthday clown.”

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“He’s a magician,” I say.
“Whatever. Are you at the Trib?”
“I’m in Centennial. Howard had sort of an accident and I had to drive him home.”
“Who’s Howard? The clown guy? Did he shit his pants?”
“I’m gonna need a ride,” I say.
“What, from Centennial?” she says, aggrieved. “You know where I am right now? I’m at Celia’s having a margarita. She got a margarita machine. It’s awesome. I’m not driving all the way to fucking Centennial.”
“Well, my car’s back at the Tribune.”
“Well, that sucks to be you,” she says. “You got yourself over there; you can get yourself home.”
“I’ll call a cab.”
“I hope they take food stamps.”
“I’ll be fine,” I say. “Tell Celia I said hello.”
“He says hello,” Bunny says. I can’t hear Celia’s response, but Bunny cackles into the receiver.
“No, seriously,” she says. “A cab from Centennial is gonna be like a hundred bucks. Give me the address. I’ll come get you.”

When I return from the kitchen, Howard is standing in the middle of the room, wearing only his wet boxer shorts and translucent wet undershirt, through which I can see the curls of his dark gray chest hair and the hollow contours of his bony frame. He has carefully laid out his tuxedo to dry on some towels on the floor.
“I’m sorry,” he says, “for causing so much trouble. I made a mistake.” He peels a long strip of surgical tape from his forearm, releasing an almost invisible monofilament that had been anchored there. “Please don’t write this story.”
“You don’t have anything to worry about,” I say. “The story is only going to be twelve inches or so, and it’s about Gary Martinez, not about you and me getting kicked out of a bar.”
“Look at me,” he says, spreading his arms in a gesture of humility. “Don’t do this to me. It’s nobody’s business.”
“You mean about you and Gary?” I ask, surprised. “That’s really not news. I mean, it’s not newsworthy.”
“I’ve heard that people don’t care anymore about these
things. But they do care. Gary cared. His family cares.”

“They know about you and Gary?” I ask.

“His wife hates me. When she called me, she said, ‘Gary’s dead. Don’t come to the funeral—we don’t want you there.’” Howard smiles. “I went anyway. I wanted to say goodbye. Her brother stopped me in the parking lot.”

My phone rings in my pocket, but I ignore it. There is a long awkwardness as Howard and I regard each other. I want to say something reassuring and positive, the way I often end my stories in the newspaper. Something to dilute a personal tragedy by putting it in a larger context: The Johnson family may have lost their home in the fire, but not their love of fireworks—Nick Johnson has already accepted a contract to design next year’s Independence Day extravaganza over Skyline Park.

“Gary was your apprentice,” I say. “That’s kind of a big deal, right? Among magicians?”

Howard shrugs. “That’s the idea,” he says. “I told him all my secrets. And some of them he kept secret.” He looks past me, to the door, and I’m not sure if he wants me to leave or if he’s merely avoiding eye contact, trying not to reveal too much of the sadness and embarrassment that is still roiling inside him, flushing his cheeks. He smiles at me again, apologetically. “That’s all I’ve got left—a couple of secrets. Let me keep them.”

“Seriously,” I say. “This has been a shitty day for both of us, Howard. You gotta give me a break. I really don’t care about your sex life. Neither does anybody else. This is just a story to fill the space between advertisements—it’s a decoration.” I feel for the digital recorder in my pocket. “Here. Tell me whatever you want me to write about Gary. That’s what I’ll write. I swear to god.” Switching on the expensive little device, I am relieved to see that it still works. “All right. What do you want to say about Gary Martinez, for the record?”

Howard scowls at me, but I push the tiny recorder toward him, just inches from his chest. The red recording light reflects from his undershirt like the laser sight of a sniper rifle. “For the record—” Howard begins. He looks at me, incredulous, and sees that I will not relent. “For the record,” he says, acquiescing, “Gary

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Martínez was the finest magician I ever met. He really understood what magic was all about."

I can see that he wants to say something significant and genuine—some antidote to the day's flimflam and polemics. But there's no specific idea behind his vague intention. His lips are open, waiting for something lucid and sincere to take shape in his mouth.

"And what's that?" I ask. "What's magic all about?"

"It's about putting on a show. It's about acting. It's not about fooling the audience—they know you don't really have magical powers." He stops, considering his platitudes like a man examining his own fingernail, noticing something new. "They know you're just some guy in a penguin suit. But for a night, they're willing to play along. Magicians—the good ones—they're playing along too. Gary knew that the illusion... the illusion is not the prop on the stage. The illusion is the stage and the theater and the audience and whole show. Everybody making this big illusion together." Howard's eyes dart around the room, perhaps imagining the rows of seats in a darkened hall. "It's like religion," he says. "It's all horseshit, and most people—sane people—know that it's all horseshit. But they go into the church and they all share the fantasy together and the priest blesses the fantasy and everybody kind of believes it and feels good about it. And everybody believing the same thing together, imagining the same thing at the same time—that's as good as reality. That's better."

My phone starts ringing again, somehow more insistent. "I'll be right out," I say to Bunny, jabbing the "end" button before she can respond.

"Your Jewish girlfriend?" he asks.

"She's not Jewish. She just likes to picture herself with a Jewish husband."

Howard snorts. "Good luck to both of you," he says.

The phone call has interrupted Howard's monologue, and I know we won't get back to that moment of fluency. But I'm sure I have a good quote. There has to be something there—the kind of sparkling, sharp-edged gem Waldo Liu seemed to elicit from every person he interviewed. I switch off the recorder.
“You know the bitch of it?” Howard asks. “I think Gary really loved his wife.”

When I emerge from the building, I have just missed the sunset. Bunny is waiting for me in the parking lot, grinning behind her huge round sunglasses. She looks like a housefly, the bulging lenses reflecting an iridescent blue-green sky. She has forced the top down on her old convertible Toyota. The canopy doesn’t fold away like it’s supposed to. I’ve told her not to drive with the top down; I worry it will catch the wind like a sail when she gets on the highway, and maybe rip free and kill somebody driving behind her. “Don’t be such a pessimist,” she always says.

“Here I am in BF Centennial,” she beams. “Who loves you?”

Her toothy smile is blue in the fading light, and her black hair is a glossy raven. A breeze passes over my damp clothes and raises gooseflesh across my arms and stomach. Bunny lowers her sunglasses and regards me with an arched eyebrow—what the hell happened to you? It’s a playful scrutiny, and in this moment, from this angle, she is intensely beautiful.