

THE SHADOWS OF KINGSTON MILLS

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MAX THE MAGNIFICENT

One week before my ninth birthday, my mother died after routine tonsil surgery. She was thirty-four.

The last image I have of her was on a gurney in the hospital hallway. She was slightly sedated, smiling crookedly, trying to reassure me that everything was going to be all right. I'm not sure she even believed what she was saying. There were tears in her eyes and a fear on her face that scared the hell out of me.

My father was there, too. He held her hand and told her how the surgery was no big deal, how they did it all the time, how it was nothing to be concerned about. He told her she was going to be just fine.

If she had lived, I doubt I would remember anything about that day. It would have been one of those events in every person's life that seemed monumental at the time, but gradually faded further and further into the background. But mother didn't live. She died. Even after my father had promised her she was going to be all right.

I never trusted him again after that. I never believed a word he said.

I locked myself in my bedroom on my birthday. My father bought a cake and ice cream, even candles. He tried. But darkness had fallen over the house. It filled our lungs when we breathed; it filled our dreams when we slept; it was everywhere. Sometimes at night I could hear him alone in his bedroom, sobbing. I would listen until I couldn't stand it any longer, then I'd cover my ears with a pillow and hum to myself until I fell asleep.

It went on like that—the miserable sorrow, the chasm growing between us—for weeks, until summer arrived and school let out. My father, who was an accountant and preferred everything in life to be

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organized and precise, hired Mrs. Everson to take care of me while he was at work.

At the time, she seemed at least a hundred years old, though looking back she was probably in her late fifties or early sixties. Her spine had begun to curve from the weight of the world and she walked with a cane whenever the arthritis in her left knee acted up. She favored a black dress that never seemed to change and wore brown, button-up high top shoes that had been out of fashion for decades. She had a strong voice, though, and eyes that were more alive than my father's.

I liked her, mostly because she let me do pretty much what I wanted as long as I told her where I was going and I showed up on time for lunch. But I also liked her because she was a small light in all the darkness.

We lived in Kingston Mills that summer. Two years later, my father would get a better paying job in Chico and he would jump on it, hoping the move would help put my mother's death behind him. But that summer, as it had been for every previous summer, fall, winter, and spring of my life, we lived in a two bedroom A-frame on a quiet little street called Black Oak.

My best friend, Jason, went to stay with his grandparents that summer while his parents were going through a messy divorce. Andy and Melissa, the twins who were twelve and lived two doors down, left on a two-month trip across the country with their parents. They were going to "rough it" as their father liked to call it ... visit national parks, camp out, fish, the whole wilderness thing. The only other kid on the block was Sammy and he was five. I was way too old to be hanging around with some diaper-wearing five year old (okay, he was out of diapers by then, but you get the point).

For the most part, that left me on my own until early in July, not long after the Fourth, when Mr. Maximilian returned from his latest tour. Max The Magnificent was the name he went by on stage, but I had always called him Mr. Maximilian at my mother's insistence.

He lived by himself, directly across the street from us, in a house that was more than he needed. Three bedrooms. A wrought-iron front gate. A redwood deck in the back that was twice the size of my bedroom and then some. He was in his late thirties, then, with black hair and a black beard, and equally black eyes. He seldom smiled, not the way he smiled onstage when he took a bow after one of his illusions (he'd done a show for my school the year before, and I remember thinking how much happier he seemed onstage than off). Still, he was friendly enough. He wasn't aloof or mean or anything like that. He was just ... a loner.

When he returned, I was in the front yard, sitting on a limb of the oak tree that had grown nearly as tall as our house. He climbed out of the pickup (the words MAX THE MAGNIFICENT in black and gold letters were printed across the passenger door), and opened the wrought-iron gate. On his way back to the truck, he spotted me and waved with only the hint of a smile. He looked tired. I waved back and watched the pickup, towing a trailer with all his illusions, disappear behind the gates.

It wasn't until the following Saturday that it came to me, one of those ideas only a nine-year-old kid could come up with. I'd been watching *Frankenstein* on television while my father was out back raking leaves and clearing some of the brush left from the unusually wet spring we'd had that year. I was ripe for just such an idea, I suppose. Nine years old, smothering from the darkness that my mother's death had brought, trying to find a way to slip out from beneath my father's dead gaze.

All I needed was a little push and there it was ... right in front of me on the television screen ... Dr. Frankenstein, all caught up in his God complex, yelling. ...

"It's alive! It's alive!"

Maximilian answered the door the following Monday afternoon only half-awake. He finished tying the red velvet sash around his bathrobe and leaned against the open door as if it were the only thing holding him up. "Peter?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. I waited 'til after lunch."

"It's all right. I'm still on my touring schedule," he said quietly. "What can I do for you?"

"I need your help with something."

"I don't suppose it can wait until tomorrow, can it?"

"It's kinda waited too long already."

He sighed, and I thought it was partly because he was still groggy after having his sleep interrupted. But that wasn't the all of it. The rest was this: for the most part, adults tolerate kids. They put up with our silly ideas, with our annoying questions and our constant talking because it was easier than trying to shut us up. Mr. Maximilian was taking the easy road.

"You want to come in, I suppose," he said.

I nodded eagerly.

A few steps inside the doorway a smoky haze hung in the air in thin layers like the stratus clouds we'd studied about in science that year. The

windows were draped with thick black fabric that blocked out even a hint of daylight. The darkness here was different from the darkness in my house, but not very different.

Maximilian placed a hand on my shoulder and directed me around a corner to a sofa in the living room. “Sit,” he said.

I sat.

“You want something to drink? Some water? Or maybe a glass of milk?”

“No, thank you.”

He nodded and opened the drapes, setting free a cloud of dust that mingled with the smoke until it almost seemed as if it were snowing. It required a little more effort to break the latch loose and raise the window, but it was an effort that was long overdue. The afternoon breeze filtered in through the screen and began to usher the dirty air outside.

“Forgive the stuffiness,” he said. “It takes a week or two before the place is livable again.”

Livable was an interesting choice of words, I thought. The room around me was like the basement storage locker of an overcrowded museum. Every square inch of the walls was plastered with posters. Blackstone—1001 Wonders. Carter the Great—World’s Weird Wonderful Wizard. Thurston—The Wonder Show of the Earth. Houdini—Metamorphosis. There were cardboard boxes stacked floor-to-ceiling in the corners, carrying labels such as Miser’s Dream, Balducci Levitation, French Drop, Behold the Scarabaeus, on and on, all the magical wonders of the world. And directly in front of me—I couldn’t believe I hadn’t whacked my shin on it as I came in—was an old steamer trunk with worn corners and stickers from Seattle to Pittsburgh, Memphis to San Antonio, all parts of the country, places I’d only heard about during my short tenure in this world.

Maximilian stared down at me as I took all this in, as if he were trying to reach inside me and read my thoughts—something I suddenly expected he could do if he really wanted. “All right, Peter, tell me your story.”

“It’s not a story.”

“You came to me because you want me to help you with something, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“Every request for help, no matter how trivial, comes with a story. So tell me yours.”

I’m not sure I completely understood what he meant, but I told him about the death of my mother because that was the only story I had in me. I told him about her tonsils and that last day in the hospital, and what it had been like at her funeral—the darkest day of my life.

As he listened, he moved the steamer trunk aside to make room, and sat on the edge of it directly in front of me. He listened patiently, without saying a word. He listened with an interest no adult—not even my mother—had ever granted me before.

I cried at the end.

He put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Peter.”

I was grateful he didn’t try to tell me what a fine woman she had been or that I needed to be strong now that she was gone. I had heard those clumsy attempts at comforting me a hundred times before and after the funeral. I wasn’t sure I could stand hearing them again.

I wiped the tears away with the back of my hand. “So will you help me?”

“Help you how?”

“To bring her back.”

The expression on his face—one of compassion and understanding—froze for a moment before it gradually disappeared. It was replaced by that look that all adults seem to have at their beck and call when they’re talking to kids, a mix of amusement and pity.

“Dr. Frankenstein did it.”

“That was a story, Peter. It wasn’t real.”

“I know, but ...”

“I’m a magician?”

“Yes. A magician.” It may sound silly now, but it didn’t sound silly then. Not to me. “I saw you make that lady disappear when you came to the school. You brought *her* back.”

“I can’t bring your mother back. I’m sorry. No one can bring her back.”

“Yes, you can. I know you can.”

“It’s all an illusion,” Maximilian said. “None of it’s real. Look ...”

He glanced around the room, his eyes even darker than usual—I could see a hint of panic behind them that I wouldn’t have believed existed before that moment. He set his sight on the stack of boxes in the far corner.

“You have to understand ... magic is all about the mind filling in the blind spots.”

He removed the top box, something labeled SPELLS, POTIONS, BLACK MAGIC, and the box beneath it, which was labeled GENII (1959-1961). The third box down in the stack of six was labeled EASY CLOSE-UPS. This was the box he pulled out and sat on the floor in front of me.

“That lady you saw, she never disappeared. She was always right there in front of you, hidden in a secret compartment. You just thought she had vanished. You imagined it, because that’s what you wanted to believe.”

He unfolded the box flaps and riffled through the contents until he found a length of thick string.

“Let me show you,” he said.

He tied the two ends of the string together, forming a loop.

“See?”

With a thumb inside each end of the loop, he pulled it taut and held it to his neck. There were two strands now, the top strand of the loop and the bottom strand, one crossing near the level of his Adam’s apple, the other slightly lower.

“Watch.”

He moved the ends behind his head, out of sight, the front strands pressing against the skin of his neck now.

“Watch,” he repeated. “Carefully.”

He made a quick motion, pulling his hands away from each other, and in that instant of movement I saw the string pass through his neck and end up behind him. He did this without any of the usual banter you might hear from a magician.

“Wow!”

“What did you see?” he asked.

“The string ... it went right through your neck.”

“That’s what your mind saw. That’s not what happened. You understand? Your mind filled in the blind spot. It came up with the only explanation it could imagine, that the string passed directly through my neck and came out the other side, and it dismissed everything else. Understand?”

“But I saw it. It did go through your neck.”

“No, you only thought you saw it.”

He showed me the loop of string again and went through the same routine, all the way up to the point where his hands and the ends of the loop were hidden behind his neck, then he turned to show me how the trick worked.

“Watch closely now.”

He moved his right thumb out of its end of the loop and into the other end of the loop side-to-side with his left thumb while keeping the loop taut with his right index finger. Maximilian did this slowly and deliberately so I could follow exactly what he was doing.

“I’m going to do this in slow motion,” he said, reminding me of something my father might say.

One end of the loop fell free and momentarily dangled loosely over his right shoulder, down the right side of his chest.

“This all happens in the blink of an eye.”

He began to gradually take up the slack by pulling his thumbs in opposite directions until the string was now stretched to its limit behind his neck.

“You see? An illusion.”

He repeated the trick, at normal speed this time, and even though I now knew how it was done, it still looked to me as if the string had passed through his neck, front to back.

“It’s not magic, Peter. Not the way you think of magic.”

I stared at the loop of string in his hands, too embarrassed to look him in the eyes, and too sick in my stomach to move. Jason had told me it wasn’t real magic when Max the Magnificent performed at our school, but I didn’t believe him. I wanted to believe in magic. I needed to believe.

“I’m sorry,” Maximilian said. “I wish—”

“Doesn’t matter. I was just kidding anyway. I knew it wasn’t real.” I blurted this out with my jaw clenched and my lips barely moving. They were the words I needed to say before I could separate myself from the dumb little kid who had come asking for help. “Gotta go now.”

“Peter—”

“Really. Mrs. Everson will be looking for me.” That was a lie, of course. Mrs. Everson never went looking for me. *Kids are kids*, she’d say. *And boys are the worst of them. As long as you tell me where you’re going and you aren’t gone long, we’ll do just fine.* I had told her I was going to Jason’s. And I wasn’t going to be long at all.

I stepped around the streamer truck, which had been moved so that it nearly blocked all of the living room doorway, rounded the corner, and exited through the front door, the same as I’d come. I didn’t say another word, but behind me, I heard Maximilian apologize again before the door closed on his words.

I didn’t go home crying. I went home feeling stupid for being so gullible and angry for reasons I didn’t understand. It wasn’t fair. The people at her funeral had been right. My mother was a fine woman. She didn’t deserve to die. Someone else should have died. Someone who wasn’t so nice. Someone without a nine-year-old son.

It wasn’t fair.

I didn’t see Maximilian the next day and wouldn’t have seen him the day after that if Mrs. Everson hadn’t kicked me out of the house after lunch.

“It’s not good for a boy to be sitting inside watching television all day,” she said. “You need the sun in your face and fresh air in your lungs. So out with you. Go on.”

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I went, but I went unhappily. Everything that summer seemed to come with unhappiness.

As had become my routine, as soon as I stepped outside the house, I headed for the oak tree in the front yard and shimmied up to the first sturdy branch, where I perched. There was that, or there was building a series of dams in the gutter whenever Mr. Farley from the top of the hill left his sprinklers running overnight. Not much of choice.

“Still mad at me?”

I don’t remember hearing Maximilian approach—I was focused on a red ant that seemed to be as lost as I was—but I must have been aware of his presence at some level because the sound of his voice didn’t startle me. I glanced at him without moving a muscle, then turned my attention back to the ant.

“You know, I lost someone I loved, too.”

His face had been tight and ill-fitting as he looked up at me in the tree, trying to keep the sun out of his eyes with one hand. But as soon as I spoke, he seemed to relax. The hand dropped away, and Maximilian sat on the lawn beneath me, his back resting against the trunk of the tree, his eyes gazing thoughtfully at the open gate of his driveway.

“My wife,” he said. “Eight years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know how much it hurts, Peter.” He tore a reed off a lonely clump of crabgrass and stuck one end in his mouth.

“Everyone says it won’t be so bad after awhile.”

“It won’t,” Maximilian said. “But it’ll never go away completely.”

The ant crawled onto my leg, circled a few times, and worked its way up to my kneecap. It hesitated there a moment and that was all the moment I needed. I flicked it into the air and sent it flying across the yard.

“Why do people have to die?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s part of the great design.”

“You mean like God?” The same people who had been telling me that it wouldn’t hurt after awhile, told me she was in heaven now, that God needed her with Him. I couldn’t imagine how God could need her more than I did.

“It’s all a mystery. No one really knows.”

“That’s what I thought.” There was a knot in the tree trunk that had found a soft spot in the middle of my back and was beginning to dig into me. I shifted until the pain passed. “Did you want her back? Your wife?”

“With all my heart and soul,” Maximilian whispered, and I could hear a sadness in his voice that I imagined was in my voice most of the time, too. “I still want her back.”

“Sometimes ...” This was something I wasn’t sure I wanted to share with him. It was something I wasn’t sure I wanted to share with anyone. So I stopped myself and thought about it first before deciding it was as safe in this moment as it was ever going to be. “Sometimes I can feel her in the room with me. You know ... my Mom.”

“It’ll gradually fade away, along with the heartache.”

“I don’t want it to fade away. It’s all I have left of her.”

“She’ll always be part of you, Peter.”

That was something the people at the funeral would have said. That was an adult with his hand on my shoulder, trying to comfort me with words that had no meaning. I let him get away with it, though. He could have said worse.

“Jesus came back,” I said.

“He was the son of God.”

“Aren’t we all supposed to be God’s children?”

He laughed. “Where did you hear that?”

“Sunday school.”

“Yes, I suppose we are all God’s children.”

“Then why—”

“I think it’s better to leave the dead to their rest,” Maximilian said.

And there was something in what he said—not in the words, but in the way he said them—that made me sit up and take notice.

“Better for who?”

“For all concerned,” he said matter-of-factly. “Some things you just don’t want to mess with.”

He left out the rest—*Believe me, I know*—but the words belonged there. It was like when my father would tell me he was going out to the garage to work on the car for awhile and he’d leave out the part about the bottle of whiskey he kept on the top shelf above the work bench behind a jar of old washers. He didn’t need to mention that part. I just knew. And now I knew that Maximilian hadn’t left his dead wife to her rest.

I jumped down from the oak tree, landing solidly on both feet, right next to where he was sitting. “Tell me.”

He looked up, all of the nightmares right there in his eyes.

“Tell me what you did to bring her back.”

“It didn’t work.”

“I don’t care. I wanna know what you did.”

“It didn’t work,” he repeated. “What’s the point?”

“Please, you gotta tell me. I need to know.”

“Weren’t you listening? Some things are better left alone.”

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“I was listening,” I said. That was all I said, all that needed to be said as I stood over him.

He glanced up at me out of the side of his eyes, uneasy, and tossed away the reed of crabgrass he’d been chewing. “What do you want from me?”

“You know.”

“It didn’t work.”

“You said that.”

Maximilian led me through a maze of boxes scattered throughout a maze of rooms that eventually arrived at a door that opened to the garage. I had always wondered why he parked in the driveway even in the winter when it was snowing, and now I knew. Except for several small aisles, nearly every square inch of the garage was occupied by his magic apparatus. Shiny silver shipping crates stood on thick black wheels like monuments to the Gods of magic. Some stood nearly as tall as the rafters. There was the Crystal Casket and the Head Turner, the Fire Cage and the Zig Zag, and thirty or forty others, too many to remember after all these years.

“Wait here,” he said, disappearing into the darkness between the crates. He returned a moment later. “No luck there.”

“What are we doing?”

“Looking for the dead.”

“In your garage?”

He grinned, a brightness shining on his face that was seldom there. He always seemed so serious. “Found the mouse trap. No mouse, though.”

“He got away?”

“With the cheese, no less.” Maximilian leaned against the nearest wall, lost in thoughts that couldn’t mask his haunted past. He was both focused and faraway at the same time, and it was only a moment or two before he snapped his fingers and went rushing back into the house.

I followed him back to the living room where we had sat across from each other two days before. He went straight for the window, where he pulled back the blinds, and discovered what he was looking for on the window sill.

“This might work,” he said. He held his open palm out to me.

“A dead fly?”

“A *recently* dead fly. It wasn’t there yesterday.”

He sat on the sofa, still holding the fly in his palm. I sat across from him. I had a good idea where this was going—it was, after all, what I had asked for—but in my heart of hearts I never expected what happened next.

I felt my stomach tighten.

The words he recited weren't English and I was only able to catch a few of them ... *kimoun, yon zonbi, yon gardyon, yon magisyen*. When he finished reciting, he inhaled and released his breath slowly over the fly. Then he held his hand out for me to watch.

The legs began to move first, a spastic, uncontrolled movement. Then one wing. Then the other. Until the fly was on its feet again. Alive. It was somewhat disoriented, I imagined, because once it stood it remained motionless for what seemed like forever.

"Go," Maximilian said.

And the fly took flight.

"Did you do that after your wife died?" I asked, watching the insect buzz around the edges of the room as if it were looking for a way out. I suppose I wasn't as surprised as I should have been, but I was nine years old and anything is still possible when you're nine.

"Yes."

"It didn't work?"

"No," he said, the sadness back in his voice.

"Why not?"

"Let me show you."

We went outside next, to his backyard this time, and Maximilian searched among the plants until he found what he was looking for ... a patch of monkshood. It was named appropriately enough for its purple flower, which did in fact have the appearance of a monk's hood, though I had always thought they looked more like maidens wearing milking bonnets, the kind of bright and distinctive flower you might find dancing in Disney's *Fantasia*.

In among the flowers, he found one that had died. Its stem was brittle, the leaves had fallen away, and while there were branches and offshoots for flowers, the flowers themselves had long since dropped.

"You see?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It's dead, like the fly."

"Yes, but unlike the fly, it's been dead for quite some time."

Maximilian recited the same, strange concoction of words again, blew his warm breath across the fragile stem, and sat back on his haunches. Not as quickly as the fly, but still within seconds, the stem responded. It appeared to stretch skyward, to reach for the sun, and I thought I could see a greenish tint siphon out of the dirt and rise up the shaft like golden water through a straw.

"I don't get it," I said, and I didn't. He had brought the monkshood back

to life just as he had done with the fly. It wasn't leafing yet, or sprouting flowers, but I could tell it was alive again, it was gaining color.

"Touch it," he said.

"Why?" I asked with the suspicion of a nine-year-old.

"It won't hurt."

While I didn't find that terribly reassuring, I trusted him enough to run my finger up one side of the spine of the monkshood. I'm not sure what I was expecting—actually, I thought it might *bite*, like it does when you run your finger against the grain of a piece of weathered wood—but instead the stem crumbled. It turned to dust and crumbled.

I looked from the plant to Maximilian. "That's what happened to your wife?"

"It took me more than two years of searching before I came across the spell," he said quietly. He stared past the patch of monkshood, off into the distance of his memories, and his eyes began to glisten. "It was too late by then. Too much time had passed."

I put my hand on *his* shoulder this time.

He broke free from his reverie. "You understand now? That's why it won't work. Too much time has passed."

"She's only been dead for a few weeks."

"A few days is too long."

"How do you know?"

"I just showed you," Maximilian said.

"How do you know how long is too long?"

"I know."

But what if he was wrong?

What if it wasn't too late?

We ate around seven that night. My father had adopted a routine of stopping at the Hill Top Market on his way home after work and picking up something for dinner. He would come in through the kitchen door, a bag of groceries in one hand, ask Mrs. Everson if I'd been a good boy, pay her for the day, and start preparing dinner. Keeping busy was his way of coping, I imagine, because it sure wasn't talking, or listening to the ballgame on the radio with his son, or treating us both to a movie down at the Kingston Mills Theater.

My mother would have nagged him to get out and do something, to quit moping around the house feeling sorry for himself.

She would have nagged both of us.

After dinner—corn on the cob, string beans, barbecued chicken and

a salad—he busied himself in the kitchen cleaning up. I went off to hide in my bedroom and read the latest issue of *Green Lantern*. It wasn't the best I'd read—it seemed a little preachy—but it was better than writing a letter to Jason, something my father had suggested I should do.

After cleaning up, my father watched a rerun of *Ironside*, and read for awhile. Sometime around 9:30, he leaned in through my open bedroom door. “‘bout that time.”

“Do I have to?”

“You can read in bed if you'd like.”

“Thanks.”

As I changed into my pjs, I heard my father going through the house, checking every lock, every window latch, and turning off the lights. He'd never done that before my mother died. Kingston Mills was a small town. It was a safe town. Everyone knew everyone else. But that was what he would do. Then he'd go to bed and read until he fell asleep. In the morning, he'd be gone before I was awake.

I turned on the nightstand lamp, turned off the bedroom light, climbed into bed and finished reading *Green Lantern*. Only I wasn't really reading. I was turning pages and skimming pages all right, even catching the occasional word, but none of them were registering.

My thoughts wouldn't let them.

My thoughts kept taking me back to Maximilian holding out his palm to me as the fly finally found its wings again and took flight.

It did work.

No matter what Maximilian said.

It did work.

Three weeks later, the Fourth of July a distant memory and school an upcoming dread, I watched from my perch in the oak tree out front as Max the Magnificent began loading his trailer for another tour. He would be gone for two to three months. That was his usual run. Then he'd return for a month (sometimes only two or three weeks), then he'd be off again on another tour.

That was the life he had chosen for himself.

That was the life of a haunted, middle-aged magician whose only joy in life came when he was onstage.

The best part of the day had passed and evening was almost on the scene when he climbed out of his pickup to close and lock the gate to his property. He glanced up at me without a smile or a wave.

There was a secret between us now. I knew more than I was supposed

to know. In an odd way, I imagined he had violated his magician's code. He had shown me how the trick worked.

I had wondered for a time if it had all been just a trick, the fly reborn, the plant crumbling, all part of an act Maximilian had long since mastered as a magician. But I'd seen the tears in his eyes after the monkhood had turned to dust, when his thoughts had returned to his wife. Those tears had been real.

He had lost her once to death, then a second time two years later.

I wasn't going to let that happen to my mother.

I wasn't going to lose her a second time because I waited too long.

An hour or two after the lights had gone off in my father's room, I slipped out of my bedroom window into the cool August night air. There was a three-quarter moon almost directly overhead that illuminated the darkness under its grayish-white reach, though I could have easily found my way blindfolded.

I climbed Maximilian's wrought-iron gate and worked my way around to the back of the house, where I found an unlocked bathroom window that I could barely squeeze through. From there, I followed the walls until I eventually found myself standing in the living room next to the sofa.

The box I had come looking for, the one labeled SPELLS, POTIONS, BLACK MAGIC, was back on top of the stack in the corner where Maximilian had apparently returned it sometime after he'd shown me the rope trick. I pulled it down and carried it into the kitchen.

I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, only that it was some sort of spell—voodoo maybe, or gypsy—that used the words *yon gardyen* and *yon goumen* and such. Under the soft kitchen lights, I sat on the floor, opened the box flaps, and began to rummage through the contents. There were magazine articles on Haitian voodoo priests, on scientific breakthroughs in cell regeneration, on African black arts. There were small plastic vials of wolf's bane and belladonna and poke root. There were candles and handmade charms and rare eagle feathers.

Buried at the bottom, I found three books. The first was titled *Los Dias de los Muertos*, the second, *u Janal Pizan*. The third book was hand bound in leather and did not carry a title on its cover. When I opened it, the leather crackled and moaned and I half expected the pages to come tumbling out, though they didn't. They were held in place by thin leather straps weaved through crude, hand-punched holes, the paper aged and yellowed with brown-stained edges and painted with words written in faded black ink.

The Souls of the Dead.

Those were the only words on the first page. The title, I imagined, though it sounded more like the answer to a question. There was a poem (or a chant or a spell or some such thing) written in English on the next page. The rest of the pages were written in other languages, some French, some Spanish, some unfamiliar to me. Except for a page near the back, written in longhand, where I *did* find something familiar ... a spattering of words that carried the same sounds as those Maximilian had recited.

This was what I had come for. These were the words that had brought life back to the fly. These were the words that would bring my mother back to me.

I read the words silently. Then out loud. Then in a fevered pitch that was a mix of desperation and blind faith. If I could only say them loud enough, above the roar of the rest of the world, maybe I would be heard; maybe it wouldn't matter if I mispronounced the words or didn't truly understand what they meant.

I said them over a photograph of my mother that I had carried in my back pocket since the day she had died.

I repeated them until my mouth was dry and my throat was sore.

When I was done, I sank back against the oven door. Tears filled my eyes without me even noticing. They spilled over and ran down my cheeks.

I wished Maximilian was there.

I wished someone would hold me tight and tell me everything was going to be all right.

I wished my mother was there to kiss my tears away.

That night I barely slept. It was a night of creaking floorboards and wind whistling through the cracks in the window frame. I kept the light on so I could read and so I could watch the bedroom door, just in case the words I had recited had actually worked. Part of me feared they hadn't, and yet another part of me feared they had. I had seen the haunted expression that was beneath the mask Maximilian wore when he was onstage. Eight years had passed since he lost his wife. Was he haunted by his failure to bring her back? By her absence? Or by something I simply didn't understand?

I wondered if my mother had returned, if she would be the same warm and loving woman she had always been. Or if she would be different, if she would be fragile and brittle and unhuggable like the monkhood. I worried about how she would escape the casket and after that how she would escape the earth that held it. I worried how she would find her way back home, how long it would take her, what my father would think

when he saw her. I worried if Maximilian would be mad at me, if he would send her back to her grave, if maybe he had been right when he had said, some things were better left alone.

Eventually, I worried myself to sleep.

When I woke the next morning and nothing had changed, the day just another summer day, I was surprised to feel a sense of relief. Who knew what pot Maximilian had stirred when he brought that fly back to life? Did it escape the house? Perhaps annoy a driver and cause an accident that resulted in someone's death? Or did it perhaps multiply a thousand times over, only to have its babies spread a new, mysterious disease throughout the world?

Who knew?

I certainly didn't.

Not then.

Not that first night or the following day.

I found out on the second night, though.

Maximilian had been right. Some things were better left alone. And that spell or chant or ritual, whatever the hell it was, didn't work. At least not the way it was intended.

My mother returned the following night. Not brittle and ready to crumble—thank God for that small favor—but not herself, either.

I woke to find her standing at my bedside. She smiled down on me, the love in her heart radiant. Her eyes were wide and bright. Her cheeks were not the ghostly pale I had feared, but were full of color and life.

"Mom!" I jumped out of bed, barely able to contain my joy, and wrapped my arms around her. At that moment, I was determined to hold on forever. She was never going to leave me again.

But that moment, unfortunately, was just that ... a moment.

My arms passed through her, as if she wasn't even there. And I knew immediately that I had made a mistake. You can't bring back the people you love. It's a selfish act to even try.

The brightness in my mother's face dimmed as she realized, as we *both* realized, that death wasn't going to let go so easily.

Nearly thirty-five years have passed now. My father died last winter, after a long bout in the hospital with pneumonia. Maximilian moved out of the area a year or so after I had slipped into his house and rummaged through his personal belongings. He left wearing the same haunted expression he always wore; only I finally understood. It was the same expression that now looks back at me in the bathroom mirror every morning.

Today, I make my living as an illustrator. Children's books mostly, though occasionally I do a comic book, and sometimes magazine covers. After college, I returned to Kingston Mills. Several years later I was able to buy the house of my childhood. I didn't buy it because I had fond memories. I bought it because I thought my mother's ghost would be more comfortable there.

It was the least I could do.

Every night she arrives and I play witness to her torment; she plays witness to my guilt. Her face has grown long with time, anguish etched deep into its folds. When she looks down on me, I turn away and struggle to get back to sleep. If I can make it to morning, I tell myself, she'll be gone. For a few hours of daylight, I can pretend everything is normal. I can pretend I never condemned her to purgatory.

Until the next night.

When she returns again.

And I'm reminded that Maximilian was right: some things truly are best left alone.