

## THAT OLD MAGIC

BY

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Lewis could hear crying.

High pitched crying, but smothered as if the victim didn't want to be discovered.

He eased himself out of his favourite chair which seemed to sink lower each time he used it.

He put his feet back into the slippers that Esther bought for him last Christmas.

He found his walking stick leaning against the wall and began to shuffle towards the sound.

He crossed the living room and leaned against the doorframe on his way out.

The crying seemed to echo around the corridor and something about it broke his heart. His eye settled on the door of the cupboard tucked under the stairs.

He noticed it was slightly ajar.

He shuffled towards it, left foot, right foot, stick, left foot right foot, stick.

The crying, still muffled, became clearer. He was right, the culprit was in the cupboard.

With extreme effort, Lewis leaned his weight against the banister and descended onto his knees. Then using the stick as an axis he turned himself around and sat on his bottom with his back to the stairs, next to the door.

He listened to the sobbing and caught his breath before speaking.

'One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl and four.....'

'..... for a boy, came a small voice from the cupboard.

Lewis smiled. 'A little bird told me you were here. What's the problem little man that you have to hide yourself away?'

There was a pause before Reiss spoke. 'I...I...was at school and it was all okay and then...I...was trying....something....at school....and....and....Joshua Penrose and his gang....I..I..laughed at me.' It was too much for him and the tears began again. Stronger than they had been before, unleashed with confessing.

Lewis considered the obvious enormity of the situation. 'How old are you now Reiss?' he asked.

'Eight,' came the breathy reply.

'As old as that already?' expressed Lewis. 'Well, I guess you're ready to know what I have to tell you then.'

There was a brief pause before Reiss' curiosity got the better of him and he asked - 'what's that then?'

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‘Often’, Lewis said, ‘People make you feel like you’re the punch line to a joke because they can actually see that you’re doing something very special.’

The whimpering had stopped by now and Reiss considered this thought carefully.

‘That doesn’t make sense’ he said. ‘How d’you mean?’

‘What were you trying to do when they laughed at you?’ asked Lewis.

‘It was in the break, everyone had gone out to play and I was inside drawing a picture of our living room but like it was real with everything in it and I was trying to make it really good so they would keep it like the other one.. and then Joshua Penrose came in with his friends, Billy Marsh and Jinny Patel and they started watching me while I did my picture... and then I went a bit wrong cos I felt nervous... and then they started laughing at what I had done. And so I took the paper and screwed it all up and threw it at them and ran away,’ The crying resumed. ‘I was trying to do better than before and they made me feel stupid that I wasn’t doing better. It was rubbish, all rubbish.’

Lewis contemplated the top of his walking stick, focussing his mind.

His memory flashed back eighty years to May River School back home in Jamaica. He could see his mother pressing his old khaki shorts and his white shirt every night and remembered how he’d longed for a pair of shoes but his father couldn’t afford them.

He could see himself writing his times table on his slate with a small piece of white chalk and eating cold cornmeal and salt fish for his lunch washed down with water from the river.

Things had changed so much, he thought, everything’s so very different. And yet, he thought, other things stay exactly the same.

‘When I was your age Reiss, I started to realise that the world offered me a thousand choices. And that at the end of the day, what I decided to do with them was up to me. Do you know what I mean?’

‘You mean that if you offer me an apple and a pear then it’s totally up to me which one I choose?’ Asked Reiss.

Lewis considered this analogy for a moment and scratched his chin saying ‘sort of.’ He leaned into the cupboard door and spoke very deliberately through the thin crack. ‘On my eighth birthday Reiss, my mother bought me a magic set. Full of little tricks it was – all the props to do them and a book of instructions. I studied that book, must have read it cover to cover ten times. I practised my tricks, day and night. Even in my dreams. I’d dream of myself on a big stage with bright lights where I could make anything disappear. The audience would applaud and I would bow.

‘I practised every moment I could because Auntie June announced that my debut performance was to be that Saturday. I’d been asked to do my first live show to the family for my mother & father’s anniversary. I decided that I was going to give them a magic show to remember. The day came and I felt ready. Everyone was there -

Auntie Enid and Uncle Desmond, Grandpa Jones and Grandpa Teale.

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A great gathering of almost thirty people – all close family, all to see my magic show. I laid out all my props and even dressed up in a little waistcoat and bow tie that Grandma had found for me. I remember it so clearly Reiss as if it were this morning.

‘Pick a card’ I said to cousin Michael and he did. Then I did lots of too-ing and fro-ing while I did the trick. Big drama – that was what the book told me to do. It was a theatrical event. And then I said, ‘The card you chose cousin Michael is the ace of hearts.’ There was a silence and then cousin Michael started to laugh. He turned the card round and I was totally wrong. Without a doubt it was a completely different card, nowhere near what I had guessed. The rest of the family tried to cheer me up telling me it didn’t matter and that it was an honest mistake. But all I could remember was cousin Michael, laughing at me and my failure.’

Lewis paused for breath and wiped his mouth dry with his handkerchief.

‘But you’re one of the best magicians in the world’ gasped Reiss in his defence.

‘Perhaps not in the world,’ said Lewis, ‘but I was good.’

‘Bet that made cousin Michael shut up’ crowed Reiss.

‘I don’t think he even remembers the incident Reiss. To him it was nothing.’

‘Didn’t you tell him?’ asked Reiss wide eyed.

‘No. That wasn’t the point. The point was, he made me work harder than I ever would have done otherwise, and that’s why I got better. You don’t get anywhere in life without hard work Reiss. Cousin Michael made me see that. I look back at that anniversary as the beginning of my success.’

Reiss was silent.

‘Do you see?’ asked Lewis looking at the cupboard.

Silence again.

The crying had stopped.

The silence felt lighter, relieved. Lewis was done.

He picked up his stick and eased his weight up until he was standing. He slowly started to shuffle away seeing that the crisis had been averted and all not lost.

As he paused at the doorway to the living room he heard the squeak of the cupboard door opening and a couple of light little feet emerge.

Lewis made his way back to his favourite chair, eased himself down and settled in for a quick snooze before dinner.

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He could feel the most delicious sleep stealing over him but something made him open one eye before surrendering to it.

His left eye eased open and before it slumped shut again he caught a brief image of Reiss on the floor at his feet with his crayons drawing picture after picture after picture.

Lewis smiled to himself and allowed his dreams to come and all he could see was eight year old Reiss, in a fine waistcoat and tie, giving the magic performance of his life.....

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