

The Magician

by Andrew Stancek

It is time, Jozi," his father said, giving a last tug to his bowtie, mussing up Jozi's hair, laughing. "We have to get our tickets by three or they will sell them. Sold out show."

His father never hurried. Leaving the father's place at the end of the weekend together, the boy would see the bus around the far curve, urge a little trot to get to the stop in time, and his father would chuckle and say, "We'll just make it, you'll see," and they always did.

The magician had been the only subject of conversation in Jozi's class for weeks. The tickets were snapped up ages ago and his classmates were all envious of his good fortune, of his father's influence at the Slovak Ministry of Culture enabling him to get two prized seats. The magician pulled a live bird with blue tail feathers out of a boy's nose. A squawking, flying bird. And the sawing in half! The picture on the posters around town showed the blonde beauty sawed right through, head and body in one box, legs in another. "Maybe if you go," his friend Jano said, "he will saw you apart. Imagine if he puts you back together the wrong way, and you will have legs growing out of the top of your head!"

His mother rolled her eyes when he told her they were going this Saturday. "Just the sort of nonsense your father is good at. You tell him that I still have not received this month's cash. You need a new jacket for the winter." Jozi looked at her. She was now only interested in coats and cash, not in magic any more. Her eyes narrowed and little specks of spittle flew as she talked. "Your father! Magicians!" Years ago, he remembered, they were at the circus together. The three of them slurped the same foamy drink

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with straws and she brushed a piece of cotton candy off his father's face. Her piercing laughter made the old couple in front of them measure her up and down. He had not heard that laugh in a long time now.

Today, in front of the Zahradne Divadlo, throngs of kids and parents milled about. The air was filled with the aroma of roast chestnuts, sausages, sauerkraut. Jozi and his father walked hand in hand through the main entrance. The red lettered sign, taped crookedly to the glass of the box office, said SOLD OUT. His father walked up to it, knocked. The pretty cashier looked up, gave his father a dazzling smile of recognition. "Ah, I was just thinking of you and poof, here you are. Your boy is only ten and so big? You take after your old man, don't you?" The boy nodded, pleased. "Well, here are the tickets. Enjoy the show."

The throng was pushing. Jozi wondered if they would get to their seats in time yet his father parted the crowd; he knew everyone. Every other man slapped his back, shook his hand; the women wiggled their fingers, and his father kissed their cheeks. Everyone compared the boy to his father, "Oh, he will be a heart-breaker, won't he?" Finally they were at their seats, second row centre.

The magician wore a black tux, silver shiny shirt, bowtie, blood red cummerbund, top hat, cape. His eyes pierced holes, his expression grim. One after another, he performed his numbers, without the slightest acknowledgment of the cheers. A flock of doves circled the theatre after he pulled them out of his empty top hat. A volunteer from the front row gave him a hundred crown note; the magician cut it into shreds. His leggy black-stockinged assistant put the shreds into the magician's hand. A squeeze and the bill was intact again. The magician turned a ping-pong ball into a shiny box and pulled out of it a wriggling white mouse. He opened his mouth,

filled with enormous white teeth and swallowed the mouse whole. His assistant tapped his stomach three times with a long wand and he pulled the mouse, now wearing a red ribbon, out of his left ear. Ooohs and aaaahs; the clapping was continuous. Jozi looked at his father, the familiar face in profile blurring with the magician's. His father grinned, teeth flashed.

"For the next number," the assistant proclaimed, "we need a brave young man, not afraid of danger, no more than ten years old." Along with every other boy in the theatre, Jozi wildly waved his hand. To groans of disappointment she pointed to him. His father slapped his back; Jozi ran up to the stage. "The following number requires the mental energy of all. Audience cooperation is required. We need absolute quiet." People still applauding quieted down; nervous coughs, throats cleared, then silence. Jozi, eyes bulging, nose runny, hands sweaty, stared at the magician, the statuesque assistant, down at his father. Perhaps, he thought, he was too quick to volunteer. His father gave him a wink and wave. The spotlight was scalding.

The assistant wheeled in a long black coffin and helped him climb on top. She told him to lie flat, side to the hushed audience. Through his thin shirt and pants he felt the chill of the cold dark wood. "Now," she announced, "we are calling upon powers beyond human imagining. The powers of the Great Anastase will overcome natural laws. If your concentration fails, the young man may burst into flame and die." Jozi could feel little flames licking his knees already. His toes, wriggling in his sneakers, were electric. He glanced sideways at his father, saw laughter. The magician paced around the coffin, tapping it, muttering incomprehensible words. His icy eyes were strangely familiar to Jozi. The energy exuding out of Anastase was surrounding him; he was growing weary, eyes closing. Silence. Jozi heard the loud thump of his own heart. And then beneath him, where the cool wood of the coffin had been chilling his back, there

was nothing. He was lifted, held by nothing. Anastase, gaze fixed upon him, kept up his mutterings, hands rigid above him as the boy lifted higher and higher. The assistant waved the wand in the growing space between the coffin and the elevating boy. The crowd began to cheer, others hushed them. Up and up he rose, a foot, two, three above the coffin, then stopped. After an eternity the magician's eyes began lowering him till Jozi once again felt the icy coffin surface below him. Anastase acknowledged the audience for the first time, giving a rigid half bow. Pandemonium erupted. Jozi continued to lie on the coffin in a daze. It had happened. Magic was real. He now knew the impossible to be possible. He felt it himself; his body had floated through the air. And if this, then anything. He looked at his father, his shiny ecstatic face. He wished.

