

Harry's Last Trick (Or the Death of Magical Thinking)

1.

The most innocuous way to begin this story is to tell you that I hit a dog. This happens to hundreds of people every day with not much recourse. Yet, I had somehow avoided this sad fate for forty-three years. The requisite guilt was intensified by all of my years as a non-dog killer. The morally upright person that walks around during the day doesn't hit animals. The only marginally aware, emotionally consumed, and half blind idiot apparently does. I don't know if this story has any clear "moral," but that might be a good one.

2.

I started this story off in a manner that I referred to as "innocuous." Now I would like to fill in that skeletal portrait with a few (possibly) hard to believe details. I will begin by describing the car that I was driving on the particular night of the accident. This would be a standard issue 1975 Volkswagen Beetle. (These, obviously, are better known in popular language as "Bugs." The cars that were shamefully clunky and unloved until Walt Disney gave one of them a human consciousness and mediocre cast mates). My "bug" was originally the conventional color of yellow.

Many years ago, I had repainted the hood and body to look like a person wearing a tuxedo. The hood was the bowtie, shirt, and jacket while the rest of it was the body of the suit wearer. A black "top hat" I had fashioned out of Plaster of Paris completed the "suit"; this was secured to the roof of the vehicle. I had wanted to finish this transformation by attaching a mannequin arm holding a magic wand to the passenger door. This had been done, and resulted in a rather costly ticket because the city court was convinced it was a "hazard." (I even spent an hour arguing with a judge about that arm. My defense entailed me stating that it "brought joy" to the thousands of city dwellers I passed ever day. This was clearly not successful, and the arm came off the next day. I would

add that my suggestion to perform a few card tricks in the court room was also very poorly received.)

The arm with the magic wand should be a tip off to my profession. For the last twenty years, I have been a professional magician. The kind you see struggling to entertain children at various birthday parties, or laboring at “gigs” in the back of bookstores and libraries. If I am unduly lucky, I might get a slot at the depilated theater that holds events for “charity.” (I have never figured out who is benefiting from these said “events.” I just know that I can go home with a cut from the store. I can lay in bed and stare at the door money stuffed in my hot little hand and ruminate about having finally “made it.”)

The car had lived for much longer than I ever thought it would. Unfortunately, it was currently serving as my home when I ran mercilessly into my four-legged friend. The evening before I had returned to the place where I was staying and found the lock had been changed. I had been bunking in a friend’s magic shop (sleeping on a couch in the storage room). I have come to believe that this unhappy outcome was far beyond my control. I looked in the window after struggling with the door with several minutes. Everything was gone and the room was covered in a sickly white color from a nearby streetlamp.

You now have a solid picture of what the car looked like. Now I need to tell you about the beast itself. The mongrel in question was well over a hundred pounds. The pitch-black night obscured many other details (the most obvious one being the actual breed). The one detail that can’t be overlooked; the dog completely demolished the front of my car. There was an inescapable dent and a very large plume of smoke that followed the metallic crunch.

The damage is not the remarkable thing about this story. The fact that the dog looked directly in my eyes and then walked off very much alive is. I didn’t see where he went, but I got out of my totaled magic mobile with a purpose. I was off to find what was left of the dog.

3.

Here are a few details to consider as “setting the scene.” This was one of the coldest nights documented in a very long time. I got out of my car and realized that I was in a part of the city that I didn’t even recognize. Typical “urban” elements like telephone polls and brick buildings were contrasted by dirt alleys and unpopulated roads that led out of town. I was to discover that very few of the citizens of this area believed in leaving their lights on. (My imagination conjured up every explanation from devil worship to shameful nudity to explain why all the windows were dark). I was dressed in my

“uniform” for shows. I had invested in a highly tailored suit that I had horizontally outgrown (my gut burst over the pant line). A back length red cape made out of velvet that collected asphalt as I walked had always complimented the suit. The red from the cape was most likely the only detail that the occasional driver could see with their headlights.

I always have painfully clear insights after a car accident. They don't always have a logical succession, but they do have a sick sort of staying power. The first major one; my “career” in magic was probably over. My trademark (the bug) was permanently damaged and my income was not going to provide for a replacement. The very thing that got from one gig to another had committed suicide by dog. I might be able to salvage the material from the back of the car (old props, costumes, and the same “how to” books I had studied since childhood). All of that stuff was now horribly dated. When I was still living in the magic shop, I had caught a ritzy cable special of a much younger and hipper magician. The idiot had toys I couldn't even imagine, not to mention a fully articulated light show behind him at all times. This was the sort of example I had been seeing lately of talent being only “optional.” The crowd was sedated by memorization and distracted by charm and showmanship. I just had the same old jokes followed by the plethora of tricks for eons now.

That is what led to another realization; there was nothing extraordinary about me. Magicians all over the country were doing various versions of my act right now. They were far from plagiarists, because every good magic show should have an element of the familiar. I just began to wonder if I had ever done anything completely unique. I wasn't just talking about my show...I was turning over every unexamined aspect of my meek little existence.

My eyes kept scanning for the dog as I walked into the darkness. As I continued walking, the question: “Why?” popped into my head. I thought I could ignore it and move on. To make matters worse, I started imagining the word: “Why?” appearing like a neon sign in front of me. The sign in my head would point to a formerly unspecified destination that would contain all the mythical answers I could possibly desire. What was the “why” really asking?

I didn't even have to ask because I inherently knew. “Why magic?” I was about to discover when I turned another corner that I had become lost on a back road. Nothing looked even remotely familiar to me at this point. I started to turn around and walk back in the direction I came from. I found myself thinking: “Fine. I clearly have a walk in front of me. Why magic?”

My very first memory has to do with a soup can that was on my mother's kitchen counter. I was all of about two and a half years old; I can remember thinking that if I concentrated hard enough the can would move. The next image that comes into my mind is of the can being in a completely different spot. This wasn't like watching a ghost drag an inanimate object across the counter. The can had very much been transported by what I saw as my own willpower. I know that any rational person can shoot this full of holes and I don't need a believer. This was simply my own experience of what I thought I saw. This led to other incidents; causing the TV to turn off and on, causing the school bus tire to blow out, and even willing a black out during one of my bored school days.

I might not have thought I was directly responsible for any of it, but I couldn't help but forge a connection in my mind. I was dreadfully bored during that school black out and just as my frustration reached its zenith: "Pop!" The bus incident was also similar; this was after I had grown to hate going to school. My younger psyche had been filled with various escape plans and a nagging, eventually all consuming dread. What could be done to ensure that the bus didn't arrive at school when we hit the end of the line? After all of the grotesque children had been collected, and the bus door shut for the final time...there had to be an escape. The moment I brought that thought into my consciousness the tire exploded and the bus was barely maneuvered to the side of the road.

What about the TV switching off? That mostly had to do with a leak my family had in the roof. I walked by one night feeling flushed with power and a giant torrent of rain came storming through the leak. The TV had been displaying a particular program I didn't approve of and I took this as more circumstantial evidence.

These brief examples are all just previews for the main attraction. I have large chunks in my memory leading up to making this decision. However, when I was sixteen, I decided that I desperately wanted to end my own life. There was a crumbly bridge by my house that overlooked a marginally crowded intersection. I had written some self-indulgent poetry (in lieu of a suicide note) and stuffed it in a pocket. I figured that whoever found my mangled corpse might be able to read whatever was left decipherable. (There clearly wasn't strong logic operating inside me at this time). That particular night I arrived at the bridge around one a.m. and teetered on the edge. I read my bad poetry to the world and then got up the gumption to make the descent.

The miracle happened when I decided half way through the jump that I wanted to live. This is what I swear to you happened; a breeze came and redirected my ninety pound frame into a row of bushes. Don't get me wrong; I still attained several serious injuries (broken bones and a long gash across my

forehead). That wasn't the point to me. I had once again willed myself to circumvent fate and ended up alive. That meant that I had some particular destiny here on the planet. I was supposed to do a 'GREAT THING' that I perhaps had yet to discover. (The phrase "GREAT THING" might as well be another one of my directionless, neon flashing signs.)

Then, after the bridge incident, I had to go away for a while...

5.

I was jolted out of my pleasant recollections by my first sighting of what I would refer to as: "The Mongrel." I suddenly spotted the dog hobbling towards a giant empty space in front of me. The space was populated by what looked like dark and misshapen structures. (I had a distant memory of a TV program I had seen once about elephant graveyards.) I stuck my hand up (almost as if I assumed the animal could see me) and started to run after it. As I approached the empty space, my eyes spontaneously adapted to the darkness surrounding me. I realized I was in the middle of a large dirt lot. The "dead elephants" turned out to be circus tents. I was in the middle of a traveling show that had obviously closed up for the night.

The Mongrel was nowhere to be found as I walked around the perimeter. I saw a couple of the carnies wandering around the corner and decided it was best to hide. I didn't want to go into a long explanation of what I was doing or why. I found a particular (and perfectly sized) spot to hide at the exit of one of the tents. That is when I noticed a smaller tent directly in front of me. The word MAGIC was displayed proudly on the roof and the tent was illustrated with pictures. There were magic wands, cards, dices, and a rather pitiful looking rabbit popping out of a hat.

I couldn't believe it; my "GREAT THING" was staring me right in the face. I knew the tent probably housed another performer. (One I assumed was infinitely more talented than I was). That didn't prevent me from walking into the unprotected entrance. I found myself in a relatively cozy environment with only about thirty seats and a small stage. The stage displayed a coffin and a saw (without the lovely assistant). There was an oversized deck of cards on top of an ancient picnic table. There was also a velvet backdrop that hardly covered the canvas wall. I was home, and I decided to perform a few tricks.

I leapt up onto the stage and bellowed: "For my first trick..."

6.

"For my first trick..."

That was a very old line in my life from when I first started doing tricks. That was after I went away for a while to The Place Which Shan't Be Named. I found myself surrounded by human beings in various stages of emotional turmoil. We were all constantly on watch by a man I liked to call "The Specialist." The Specialist was a dry humored, bald, and overly diplomatic man that we all had to spend at least an hour a week with. The other half of the time was spent with the Specialist and the rest of us seated in an awkward badly formed semi-circle staring at each other. I was never quite sure of how any of this was supposed to translate into anything productive. I wonder if we all were led to believe that a cure would present itself at just the right time. The good news was that we had the evening (mostly) free and there was a wide selection of books.

I was having one of my bouts of sleeplessness when I decided to go wandering the halls. There were various bookshelves tucked away and completely ignored in just about every corner. The books and shelves collected more and more dust as they were spread further out. I eventually got all the way to the end of one of the hallways and found a case with a single book. By this point, I was in almost complete darkness with nothing but a bit of moonlight shining through the venetian blinds. I attribute that fact to my motivation for picking up this oddly orphaned volume. In any other circumstance, I would have turned a blind eye and kept on walking.

The moonlight fell on what I perceived to be a diagram that held little appeal. That was before a bit more study illuminated the fact that it was instructions for a card trick. That was enough for me to tuck the book under my arm and walk away with it. I was fortunate enough to have a room to myself. (That had to do with my last roommate having an unfortunate encounter with the ceiling and his shoelaces.) I could flip on the light at random and read for many hours on end. I found entire nights vanishing under the influence of obscure "magical spells" and slights of hand. This allowed me to sleepwalk through just about everything else.

The final culmination in becoming a magician was to give my first real show. I was pleasantly surprised that the Specialist was all for this "opportunity." He even donated me an hour or so on the cafeteria stage after our "medicine" break. I found myself performing magic tricks in front of a bunch of zonked out patients. There were two sizable takeaways from this particular experience. The completely unreceptive members of the audience were hazing me for the future. I also did a full out stumble when I first took the stage that brought down the house. This was the unintentional creation of a personae; the bumbling idiot that was at least marginally competent. I would go about pretending that I didn't know what I was doing. That would make the pay off of

each magic trick a surprise. All of these events seemed accidental until I thought about it later.

My mysterious streak of self-appointed “luck” was continuing. I was “approved” to leave The Place Which Shan’t Be Named. I was never to lay eyes on the Specialist again. He might not have been visibly present, but he was forever in my thoughts in a nightmarish way. The voice of unintentional deterrent is a pleasant way to refer to him. I always have his voice in the back of my head saying: “Is that really such a great idea?”

7.

The small stage I stood on was now consumed with a wash of magic supplies. I had found a stack of boxes stuffed in a corner. Each one of them had been badly taped together and was clearly overflowing with the tricks of the trade. I had started to perform almost on autopilot. I was only dimly aware of stage lights slowly rising on me as I did my usual “competent idiot” act. I didn’t even notice a dark figure seated at the end of one of the aisles. That might have continued if I hadn’t heard oddly incongruous applause after one more card trick. I looked out into the darkness.

That is when I saw a familiar face; the Specialist was watching me intently. I couldn’t mistake the face or the antique pair of spectacles. The only thing that had changed was that he was wearing a clown suit. There was even remnants of white make-up around his eyes (he didn’t finish cleaning himself up). I looked directly at him and he exaggeratedly clapped again. I was so dumbfounded that I had to wait for him to speak.

“You’ve gotten better,” the Specialist said.

“Was I bad before?” I said as I walked towards the edge of the stage.

“You were...unformed,” the Specialist told me.

He got up and walked towards the edge of the stage and I helped him up.

“Why the clown suit?” I asked.

“Sort of a childhood ambition,” he said.

I had never noticed a beach ball that was rolling around on stage. (I fully acknowledge the fact that it might have always been there I just hadn’t noticed it. That is a completely unimportant detail to me). We started to pass the ball back and forth in a standard game of catch. That was until the game mutated and the Specialist must have grown a new set of limbs. The man was infinitely more agile than I ever could have imagined. He would dart from one point to another and I could never quite locate him. I would toss the ball into the darkness and watch the clown suit materialize out of nowhere. The ball would

plummet back into my arms and simultaneously release itself. I found that I could dash away just in time to catch the ball at another location.

The ball finally landed and my feet and I didn't have the inclination to toss it again. The Specialist appeared out of the darkness and started to cradle the ball like a baby.

"When did you ever want to be a clown?" I asked, out of breath.

"More of a direct route to happiness," the Clown informed me.

"How so?" I found myself sitting down.

The Specialist sat down next to me, still holding the ball for dear life.

"What I did," he started to explain, "There's theories and techniques. There's charts to follow. But clowns make people laugh."

The Specialist smiled, which was also something I didn't know he could do. He eased the ball into my lap and pushed it down with his hand.

"I thought of a final trick for our act," the Specialist said.

"What act?"

"The one we were doing just now."

I wanted to push the ball away from, but found the same kind of paralysis.

"Okay," I said, "What is the grand finale?"

The Specialist looked me dead in the eye: "I want you to make this ball disappear."

I placed my hand on the ball and concentrated. Wasn't the ball just like my childhood soup can? I closed my eyes for a fleeting moment and felt the strangeness of the rubber. The ball wouldn't recognize my willpower. I didn't feel the cold air that my imagination desired. The emptiness that would signify that I was just as powerful as I had always assumed. When I opened my eyes, I found the dead looking beach ball staring back at me. The Specialist, however, was completely gone from the stage.

8.

I had vague ambitions when I got out of The Place Which Shan't Be Named. The title "magician" was wonderfully evocative but aimless. This trade, if you can call it that, doesn't have a clear path. There aren't clubs that people join or signs that sprout up on the side of the road that say: "Magicians Welcome." I didn't go to school; I just read many books and slept out in parks at night. That same crazy faith was with me at all times. The faith was made worse by the various wild and almost tangible daydreams. In my head, I had reached the absolute zenith of success.

Here is a sketch of that particular doubled headed monster. I had somehow found an abandoned house in my wanderings. The door was open

when I found it and everything was relatively clean. This, in my crazed state, was now a wonderful place to “rehearse.” This was directly after I had decided on my new nome de plume: “Harry the Magnificent.” Have you ever created an alter ego? They give you a wonderful excuse to blame everything on a ghost. The skeletal, hungry version of me could say that “Harry” stole the candy bar out of the convenience store. “Harry” could have a total disregard for sleep when I spent all night pouring over magic books.

“Harry” was the person who transformed this house. “Harry” found various bright colors of paint in the garage and mercilessly splashed them on the white walls. “Harry” decided that he needed a bonfire in the living room to stay warm. “Harry” painted crude pictures on the walls of what should have been the children’s rooms. Little by little, I imagined that the entire home was my stage. The original home started to fade away as “Harry” entertained his millions of adoring fans.

I would also tell you that “Harry” was the person who chased off the people who showed up to reclaim the house. I believe that “Harry” rushed at them and yelled at the top of his lungs: “Now I will make you all vanish.”

9.

“Harry” was with me tonight. “Harry” was the one who started to decorate the stage. He pushed the coffin and saw in the center of the stage. He was the one who made a vain attempt to clean the debris off his stage with his foot. “Harry” was setting the stage for a certain person to show up. I had rather ambivalent feelings about her, but “Harry” needed her to come. The question was how long both of us were willing to wait.

10.

I found myself wandering again after having to leave my house/auditorium. “Harry” would appear to me from time to time as the laziest travel guide who ever lived. He would be my guiding instinct when it was time to eat, sleep, or move on. I only have dim memories; there is a traveling circus, a few children’s birthday parties, and a disastrous appearance in the back of a bookstore. The wisest thing would have been to stay in one area and try to truly establish myself as a “name.” This just didn’t suit my dual personality. The best way to deceive myself (and “Harry”) of my mysteriousness was to show up as a foreign object in each new environment. I would perform (many times illegally) on various street corners. There was even a few times when my fear of the law got so great that I gave “late night shows.” The various non-human and human

vermin would gather around me as I used streetlights as stage lighting. On some nights, there might only be five or six audience members. That mattered very little to “Harry” or myself because the applause always sounded deafening to both of us.

This was around the same time that I discovered that joy was an oddly tradable currency. People would take me in with no questions asked. There would be the opportunity to shower and stay two or three nights. My trademark suit appeared because I met a tailor with a few extra pieces of clothing. (The cape was his idea and it fit me just right with the exception of a few inches that trailed behind me. He even offered to correct it but I absolutely refused. This was, in my mind, part of the “Harry” gag. How does this idiot even walk around without tripping on his cape?)

My sense of time completely eroded while I was traveling. I can’t tell you precisely how long I was out roving. There was only the exact moment when it stopped cold. I had found some other anonymous city to wander through. I was right in the middle of scouting my spot for tonight’s late night show. I was crossing a bridge when I saw a pale skinned, black haired girl standing a tad too close to the ledge. She was wearing what looked to be a ball gown. This was not the most important detail; she had an elaborate pair of angel wings strapped to her back. The logical part of my mind knew this was just a costume. “Harry” was the one who saw her, as she would like to be seen. The fact that it looked like she was about to jump off the bridge had not escaped either one of us.

11.

The inside of the tent felt like it had expanded. There were new rows of chairs that I hadn’t noticed before. The stage grew in size; the interior of the tent (which had originally felt cramped) was now oddly cacophonous. The canvas on the back wall was slipping down and starting to reveal some kind of poster. I walked away from the coffin and saw towards whatever the piece of the art was. I was about to find a piece of artwork that I had fashioned years before. The woman I just told you about stood on the bridge with her wings. She faced the onlooker with a radiant, death-defying smile. I had illustrated her standing under a streetlamp just in the way I used to. The younger version of me stood next to the woman. That’s when I was reminded of the unfortunate truth that I was once considered handsome. The obscene handsomeness canceled out the over all ludicrousness of the magician’s costume.

Bold lettering at the bottom of the picture read: “Amelia Flies!” I checked to see if I could find a date for this performance. (The date of the original performance had long escaped from my memory). I finally found the date hidden

at the very bottom of the picture. That is when I found tonight's date staring at me in the face. There was no other way than to see that as the final sign; Amelia was going to be here soon. I had started to feel my anticipatory nervousness when the picture shifted. The reflection surface of a mirror replaced the two figures and the magic proposition of flight.

I can't remember when I had made the habit of intentionally not looking at myself. Perhaps I had begun to assume that a youthful profession would keep me from the ravages of age. That was not going to be the case; I could only see remnants of my formerly handsome visage. Everything had unfortunately dropped or receded to an uncorrectable degree. My suit was severely distorted by weight gained over the long course of a life filled with health related neglect. The most disturbing thing to look for me was my own set of eyes. They have oddly changed to a darker, battle weary color of green. I looked like a person who physically couldn't stand waiting for another second.

How much longer would I have to wait?

12.

As you have no doubt gathered, Amelia was the woman on the bridge. The heroic piece of me felt the need to somehow intervene. I approached her and magically made a bouquet of flowers appear in my hand. I handed it to her and she accepted without giving me eye contact.

The very first thing Amelia ever said to me was this indicative statement: "My dear, I'm not sure your magical flowers will ever quite be enough."

"What would, then?" I asked.

Amelia turned her face to me and said: "Make me fly."

Amelia was a classically beautiful woman with one minor exception. She had a long scar that ran from the top of forehead to the bottom of her nose. As I was going to find out, her explanation would change constantly for why she had this.

"How am I supposed to do that?" I asked.

"With your magical powers," she retorted, "You do have powers, don't you?"

"I would like to believe so," I said.

"Use them now!" she exclaimed.

That is when Amelia hoisted herself off the bridge into the shallow body of water below. There was at least a brief moment I could have sworn that her wings organically flapped. I did everything I could to concentrate (much in the same way that I had on the soup can from my youth). I can't really attest to how much help I was. The worries over my true abilities were canceled out as I

rushed down to help the woman I had just met. I even went as far as to jump into the water without any concern for my suit or cape. Amelia surfaced from the water with any superficial injuries and an eerie smile. This was a regular practice for her (as I was about to find out).

I dragged Amelia out and set her on the ground.

“Magic doesn’t exist!” she proclaimed, before passing out cold.

That one line might have been enough to cement our history together. Disproving it became more than a hobby; it slid into the world of a deeply sick obsession.

13.

I realized the surface of the mirror at the back of the tent had faded. I was watching my first encounter with Amelia in front of me like some dreadful movie. I’m still not sure where the mirror shifted back and I could see the inside of the tent. The night was still very much in tact outside. The arena was cast in dull shadows that just seemed senseless to me at this point. That is when I saw the mongrel I had hit wander into the space and to the edge of the stage. I bolted around to confront it and just saw a sad dog smile. The animal was still mobile and almost didn’t look damaged. The only hint of the accident came in the form of blood dripping out of the mouth. I wanted to utter an apology and found myself unable to do it.

Then the dog was gone from the space. I walked slowly around the room looking for any sign of it. I walked back up on the stage and found the mirror flickering again.

14.

Amelia and I had found each other during another one of my bouts of homelessness. She offered to let me sleep on a dilapidated couch in her living room for an indefinite amount of time. I assumed that she wanted intimacy; instead, I was going to be subjected to months of not being touched by her. The constant denial of any kind of physical bond just made me more desirous of her. Whenever I made overtures, she would push me away and say: “No, I care about you too much.”

Over the next few months I was going to discover that Amelia had “gentleman callers.” They would show up at her home; each one looking more hopeless than the last. They were the absolute dregs of society; men with unsightly skin conditions, amputees, and those with an almost unfathomable sadness. She would pull them into her tiny closet-sized bedroom. If I didn’t want

to hear the sounds of their encounters, I would have to retreat to the hole in the wall diner below her apartment. There was a pretty waitress there who would take pity on me and give me free coffee. I would let it seep into my very being as I seethed about what I was denied. The fact that the waitress was paying me attention was completely lost on me at the time. (Sometimes when I can't get to sleep, I find myself thinking about the waitress and what become of her. I have invented numerous scenarios in which she has nothing but infinite security and happiness. The thought that someone is at peace helps me rest a bit).

What kept me there? That would be the nonsense of what was to be deemed our "project." Perhaps I should explain how Amelia's mind worked. She was haunted by a singular childhood dream about flying over a range of mountains. This was done completely without any kind of assistance (the way many of us fly in our dreams). She had a similar GREAT THING in mind to me. This led to a childhood full of near accidents; higher and higher surfaces from which to plummet off of. Somewhere in her lost years she started wearing the angels' wings as a trademark. The fundamental difference between Amelia and myself was relatively simple. She had stopped believing, and I didn't understand how that could happen.

On the second night at her place, I found myself vowing to give her a functional set of wings. That led to months of scouring libraries for every kind of book on aviation. I discovered that I was capable of doing very complex mathematical problems. I even was to discover that I had somewhat of a gift for elaborate construction. I had to find a way to conceal all of the mechanical inner workings of the wings in the right amount of feathers. The wings, in turn, had to look naturally attached to Amelia's tiny body. The last pair I was ever to produce was almost credible as a real set of angelic limbs.

I was to discover that this was mostly "baptism by fire" work. Each new pair of wings had to be subjected to a number of rigorous tests. Amelia would hurl herself from a high surface with frantically flapping arms. I would use this an excuse to "catch" her. By the time we developed the last set of wings, a strange and miraculous thing occurred. Amelia stopped flapping and flew for a magnificent thirty seconds. She glided to a safe landing on a near by piece of dirt. I had closed my eyes and concentrated as hard as I possibly could; this time I let my desperation bleed out into the atmosphere. When Amelia and I looked at each other, there was a silent understanding that magic had been achieved.

The next few weeks were spent plastering the town with our "Amelia Flies" posters. This mystical event was going to take place on the same bridge where I met Amelia for the first time. I have forgotten most of the details of the actual day. I wish I could tell you how many people showed up. I even wish I could repeat word for word my introduction. My distorted memory would have

me believe that it was one of the great oratory performances of all time. Truth be told, I can't even the sensation of giving it. The words left my mouth and then Amelia took her position on the ledge.

The next few minutes always expand in my mind to be longer than they were. Amelia flapped her wings, glided, and then crashed into the ground next to the water. I heard gasps from the audience as she became motionless. Her eyes closed, and I found my first impulse was to run. That's right; I didn't stick around to see what happened or how I could help. No one chased after me because there was a dying woman on the ground. The armchair psychologist could tell you that I didn't want my naïveté shattered. My steadfast dedication to belief in magic would have taken a severe blow. Was that really it? The fundamental truth is that I have no earthly clue why I bolted.

15.

I stopped looking in the mirror after the last image of Amelia on the ground faded. The theater remained empty, and the stage remained silent. I could feel the sensation of disappointment as a knot in my stomach. I started to head towards the exit. That is when the tent was swamped with light. The seats were instantaneously filled with a crowd of well-dressed spectators. The sounds of wild applause deafened me. Through no action of my own, I found myself back on stage with a confidence I hadn't known before. The marginally competent "Harry" was nowhere in my body.

My voice boomed as I said: "We've all had impossible dreams! Dreams that haunt us with their impossibility. What would you do if nothing stopped you? Maybe you would fly!" As the last line bellowed from me, I saw an elderly woman with a pair of wings begin to flutter down from the ceiling. I would have recognized her anywhere at any age. This was Amelia; but her black hair had turned grey and her distinctive scar had gotten longer. Amelia's style of dress had gone from revealing dresses to what respectively looked like a hospital gown. The crowd loudly voiced its approval as Amelia whirled around the top of the tent. There were moments when she would just vanish into darkness only to emerge triumphantly in light. The vanishing act was supplemented with elaborate summersaults and mind numbingly excellent flips. The final trick consisted of Amelia coming to a dead stand still in mid-air. I could physically feel the audience holds its breath until she descended down to the stage. She bowed to wild applause that I thought would never end.

The entire time I watched Amelia's flying out with a professional distance. Her wings were even more realistic than anything I could fashion. They moved with organic grace and precise birdlike timing that I

couldn't help but marvel at. I even found myself wanting wholeheartedly to believe they were real. They even folded up as Amelia went into a second bow for her delighted audience.

The lights shut off we were covered in complete blackness.

16.

I found Amelia and I engulfed in a floodlight that made very little else visible. I realized in the moment that a person's smile never changes. Amelia's was just as paradoxically distant and warm as it had always been. I felt my smile plaster onto my face as tears welled up in my eyes. She stole the exact thought from my mind as she began to speak.

"I was finally able to fly," she said.

"You fly beautifully," I answered, "No thanks to me."

"That's unimportant now," she said, reaching for my arm.

We walked together in the darkness for a while.

"Was it everything you expected to be?" I finally asked.

"I wouldn't necessarily say so," she stopped walking.

"Why?"

"The most satisfying feeling came after I landed for the first time. The knowledge that I could finally look back and know that some kind of miracle was achieved. You can't spot a miracle when you are right in the middle of it."

"I've been trying to my entire life."

She laughed gently and touched my face.

"Have you still not done it yet?" she said, laughing.

"I keep thinking that I'll be able to spot it. Be able to look around at the world transforming around me while smiling. I've spent so much time imagining it...shouldn't I just be able to freeze time and know it when it comes?"

"No," she said, "you should feel it in your gut. Here..."

She grabbed my hand and set it on the wings. This was just as I imagined it to be. There was no separation from her flesh; the wings moved underneath my nervous fingers. That was when she started to vanish from my sight.

"Wait," I said, "how is this possible?"

"I stopped wishing," she called back, "and then it happened."

After that, Amelia was completely gone. I could just hear her laughing from somewhere in the pitch black. I suddenly realized how long it had been since I heard her distinct brand of chuckle. The one that accompanied every single part of our flying "work." She would laugh at every single fitting of a new pair of wings. She would even chortle after thousands of rough landings. There was nothing that would ever stop her from a certain pleasing ironic

distance. Was that why I did it all? Just to hear a beautiful woman laugh? The women that I just let vanish again from my sight.

The Specialist appeared out of the darkness dressed in his clown suit.

“Should I have just been a comedian?” I asked.

The Specialist just raised his eyebrow and snapped his fingers.

17.

I was back on stage again with the Specialist with the house lights up. I could see every one of the joy filled faces as they applauded. The Specialist stood at a microphone stand off to my left and gestured at me wildly.

“Please applaud Harry,” he proclaimed, “Please applaud Harry the Magnificent in his final performance.”

Two words were clearly etched in my memory; and they were *final performance* I wanted to ask The Specialist: “Is this really it?” I knew from personal experience that I wouldn’t get anything back but a non-answer. I turned to another direction, and that is when I saw the dog again. The dog was laid on its side and breathed in a terminal sounding shallow manner. I turned around to see the Specialist nod at me to approach the dog. I turned my back towards the Specialist as I heard his authoritative voice boom through the microphone.

“For his last trick ever,” the Specialist said, “Harry will save the life of a dying dog.”

I found myself crouching down by the dog and putting my hand on its midsection. Hadn’t my entire life trained me to do the impossible? The journey that began with an innocuous can of soup was about to end. The crowd was relying on me to save this animal that my Beetle had such an unfortunate run-in with. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the animal well. I attempted to imagine its entire life as the most blessed existence a dog could ever have. I extrapolated that this was a life the dog wanted to return to desperately. The only way to do that was to rediscover his vitality that was right at my fingertips.

Nothing happened.

I opened my eyes to discover that the dog was even more distant. The dog’s eyes were now closed and the body was even stiffer. My magical touch was not being summoned; I suppose that would lead more logical people to realize that it was never real. I was so much concerned with the discovery of my own delusions at the moment. If I couldn’t save the dog, what could I do in this moment? I took off my cape and covered the dog. I gave it one final pat on the head and then stood up to face the crowd.

“I couldn’t save it,” I cried out, “But I could make it disappear.”

I heard the crowd laugh approvingly and then begin a loud applause. The Specialist walked up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder.

“That was exactly the right answer,” the Specialist told me.

The crowd rose to its feet and I waved one last time and began to exit the stage. The lights snapped off again and I found myself in an empty tent. The space was back to its tragically original size. I could detect a few early morning sunrays streaming through the cracks in the canvas. My cape was still on exact same spot that I had left it when I covered the dog. At any other time in my life, I would have hurried to pick it back up and reattach the thing to my suit. I knew that I wouldn’t do that again as I continued to study it. That is when I realized that I wasn’t alone.

A burly, tattooed carny was staring straight at me with a combination of confusion and menace.

“Old timer,” he said, “I’m afraid I am going to ask you to leave.”

“Just one moment longer?” I asked.

The carny shook his head and pointed to an exit. The frown was the most prominent thing I noticed as I took off my top hat.

“Maybe what you need most,” I said, “is a top hat.”

I jumped off the stage and placed on the hat on his head before he could protest. Then I rushed out the exit into the burgeoning sunrise.