

The Magician

Between a meadow and a peaceful valley lies the town of Shepherd. Rockwellian to a fault and a single shared highway exit to its name, it's the kind of town where doors are left unlocked and porch lights burn at dusk. Elm trees dot the community park and occasional yard, providing an ample supply of shade in the summer and dead leaf piles for jumping in come fall. That's the kind of town Shepherd is. As the sun settles in on a balmy July evening, the community has gathered in the town theater. They're waiting for Benjamin Locke to appear on stage and for what the posters through town hail as his "Astounding Show of Magick and Mind Trickery" to start. Engaging in polite conversation and eager speculation, the townsfolk recall the productive day and the neat treat in store for them. Mayor Worsley himself booked the act, a fact he boastfully repeats to Henry Gale and his shy daughter Alexandra.

"I'm tellin' ya Henry, the things this Locke guy can do are astoundin', just like the poster says. Astoundin'!"

"Well that certainly does sound a treat, Mayor Worsley. I know Alex here's been 'specially lookin' forward to it." Henry gave his daughter a gentle tug closer, and smiled down at her waiting for a response. "Well? Aren't you Alex?"

"Of course I am Dad, you know that." Her cheeks grew pink, and she made a grasping motion to her collar though it wasn't at all snug. The lure of a magic show was motivation enough for her attendance, but not quite enough for socializing. Mayor Worsley took little notice, and excused himself.

"Oops, people are getting restless and that'd be my cue Henry. Have a seat and enjoy the show." Henry and Alex took their seats and watched as he bounded down the aisle and up the back steps to the stage. The house lights went down as the stage lights came up, and Worsley

greeted the crowd with his usual gusto and vigor. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m excited to see you all here tonight. I know you’ve all seen the posters I had posted ‘round town, and I also know it’s been a hot topic in daily discussions, my popularity ratings notwithstanding.” The crowd gave a warm chuckle, keenly aware his ratings were high. “I can promise you those posters read correct, and that tonight’s show will be astoundin’ as all that. Just you sit, take it in and give it up for Benjamin Locke!” The crowd responded in kind with as thunderous an applause as a small town like Shepherd can muster. Worsley was right, and the show will be astounding as promised, but it will not end well.

Locke came onto the stage dressed as any magician should be, a snappy black tuxedo and silk top hat, and he drank the audience’s applause like sparkling water. His gorgeous blonde assistant trailing behind in her surprisingly modest costume tossed him an over-large magic wand which he caught deftly, but stared at in disbelief.

“So sorry folks, but it seems Miss Eloise gave me the wrong wand.” Eloise coyly put her hand to her lips, delightfully feigning surprise at her mistake. “Trivial matter though, and I can fix it.” With a tap, a smack and a final whack, the trick wand burst into a colorful bouquet of flowers, from which he pulled his real wand. Trivial as it may have been, it was a joy to behold for the town of Shepherd, and Alex especially. Locke knew he was off to a roaring start, and he kept the momentum high throughout his act.

Many staples of stage magic made an appearance in the show; doves born from empty metal lids and fire, the disappearance and reappearance of a rabbit, destruction and restoration of personal effects, lovely assistant teleportation and even the defiance of gravity! Spellbound, the crowd “Ooh’d” and “Ahh’d” at all the right times with a clockwork precision. Captive in Locke’s enchanted hands and mesmerized by Eloise’s beauty and grace, Alex felt the people

surrounding her fade away leaving only herself and the magic on stage. Surging applause brought her senses back, as well as the people, as Locke thanked them and announced his last trick of the evening.

“Now, for this particular trick, I will need a volunteer. Not that Miss Eloise isn’t a capable helper in her own right, but because *she* will be part of the trick!” Eloise repeated her coy hand-to-mouth gesture, and curtsied genially. “Normally it would be someone from the audience.” At this, the crowd erupted once more, hands flying up in the dire hope of being selected. Alex was no exception, as she stood on the warped wood bench flailing her arm as best she could until Locke raised his arms to quell the commotion. “Thank you all, but as I said, I would *normally* choose from the audience. Mayor Worsley has the honor tonight, and he’s quite excited for it. So please, a round of applause for Mayor Worsley!”

While not as enthusiastic as they were moments before, the people of Shepherd clapped and whooped for their beloved Mayor. Worsley took to the stage, soaking in the attention and the bright stage lights as politicians are wont to do.

“So, Mr. Locke, what is it you need my help with?”

“Mayor Worsley, what I need you to do is verify that these-!” Eloise wheeled a rack full of swords onto the stage, “are genuine, hand forged rapiers!” Bewildered, the crowd whispered sharply, deathly curious to know what they were for and if they were indeed real. Worsley removed one of the blades from its place and inspected it closely. While he was by no means a swordsmith, he knew what to look for in a sharp blade. After flicking the edge with his thumb, he nodded and announced the sword was real. At this, Eloise wheeled out a large wicker basket, like what would be found at a market in India. “Ladies and gentlemen, your Mayor has kindly verified that these rapiers are real. Now, for my last trick, Eloise will climb into this wicker

basket,” which she was already doing “and with some assistance from your Mayor, I will pierce it with these very swords!” The gasps from the crowd were so sharp and so deep, that it felt as if the air itself had been robbed from the room. “For this trick, I will need absolute silence, so please... do not... make... a sound.”

Locke closed the lid on Eloise and the basket, and grasped the first sword. Setting the tip gently against the edge, Locke thrust the blade into the basket. There was no sound from the basket, just as there was no sound from the audience as Locke picked up the second sword and repeated the motion. He drove the third sword in, plunged the fourth and fifth blades as well, and still no sounds from the basket or audience. With one sword left, Locke motioned for Worsley to come closer, and he placed the sixth sword into the Mayor’s hand. They both carefully positioned it, and on his own, Worsley drove the rapier into the basket, where a blood curdling scream exploded from the basket! The audience shot up to their feet, panic tightening its icy grip on their throats when Locke yelled for calm and Worsley did the same. When the noise was distilled to an ominous murmur, Locke lifted the basket lid as Eloise burst free, nary a scratch on her, the same lovely smile on her face as before. Monstrous applause and excited hoots filled the theater as Locke and lovely Eloise bowed. Mayor Worsley clapped the loudest and thanked the both of them for the truly “Astoundin’” show.

“That really was something else there Benjamin. Them posters didn’t lie one bit, and I know we’d love it if y’came back this time next year.”

“I believe that can be arranged Mayor Worsley.”

“Please, please, call me Charlie, Benjamin. But, listen. Before y’go, I think we’d all like to know exactly how you did what you did, wouldn’t we folks?” The townsfolk gave an agreeing round approval at the idea, though Alex didn’t quite consent.”

“How I did it?” Locke laughed heartily; playing along with what he believed was a game. “No, you should know that a magician doesn’t divulge his secrets, Charlie. It’s simply not how it works.” The smile on Worsley’s face faded slightly.

“Actually, I don’t know that’s how it works, and frankly that’s kind of the problem. We should be told how you did all this. It’s only fair, and somethin’ of a lie otherwise.”

“A lie? Charlie, magic is *supposed* to be mysterious. If I told you how it was done what magic would there be?”

“I don’t think that’s for you to decide. Now, we want to know how you did this.” A chorus of ‘Yeah’s and ‘It’s only fair’s came from the townsfolk, and any trace of a smile had since faded from Worsley’s face. This was a man who got what he wanted, and Locke began to see that. Not every face in the crowd lit up at the Mayor’s calls for transparency. They were happy with the show, and content to let it stay a mystery, but a silent majority is no match when the minority is so vocal.

“Okay, I’m lost. You people honestly don’t know that magic is meant to have a layer of secrecy? You can’t seriously be that backwater now can you? Charlie, I-“ Worsley gripped tightly to the lapel of Locke’s tuxedo, his face slightly purpling with anger.

“Don’t you call me Charlie, and don’t you call us ‘backwater!’ We’re a friendly and welcoming community here, but we do *not* take kindly to liars, cheats or deceivers.”

“Dammit, you senseless hick, let go of me!” Locke struggled to get free, but Worsley outmatched him in nearly every physical category.

“Not until you tell us how you did it, you swindlin’ fraudster!”

“**You let him be!**” The shrill burst of noise came from deep in the audience, causing the Mayor to start and ease his grip on Locke. The creaking of warped wood echoed through the hall

as people turned to see who dared to speak out against the scuffle and disdainful murmuring.

Alexandra Gale was trembling terribly, her hand grasping desperately at her collar as if some noose was around it. She couldn't stand to see such a wonderful person as Benjamin Locke be treated in such a way, especially after what he had given to the town. As the townsfolk turned to her, she could feel the burn of their eyes upon her being. She did not like attention, even in small doses, but as she looked around at her fellow people the burn of their gaze turned to brazen embers within her.

“All that Mister Locke wanted to do was give us a good show, and he did that. Didn't he?” Heads scattered through the crowd began to nod, and a meek “That he did” cropped up as well. Alex felt the embers breathe, as wisps of flame danced inside her. “And what he's saying is true, he can't just blab his secrets to us. That would ruin the show. How impressed would we all still be if we discovered how unimpressive it actually was?”

“Pretty damn unimpressed, that's how much!” The cry came from somewhere in the audience, but Alex didn't look to see as she was so excited to be making a stand, the fire within her raging now. More people were coming to her side, aiding her with ecstatic cries and words of encouragement

“So I say we should be happy with what we *did* get, and hope that if Mister Locke *does* come back next year that he'll have even more amazing magic tricks for us!” The crowd cheered at her words, and began chanting “more magic, more magic.” Alex was no longer grasping at her collar and she felt a great pride in what she had just done.

Mayor Worsley's face faded from purple to a light puce during Alex's speech, and he had let go of Locke completely. When the chanting wouldn't stop however, the color began to intensify again. He strode to the front of the stage and screamed. “Never! I refuse to let this, this

sharlaton within city limits again. Now you stop that damn hollerin'a'yers and get back home! And you,” Worsley raised a meaty finger and pointed it in Locke’s face. “You get yer damned act out of my town, y’hear. You are *never* to return as long as I’m mayor of this place.”

“Yeah, however long that is!” Worsley spun towards the slowly dispersing crowd, desperate to match a face to the voice. “I know that’s you, Sawyer! I heard you make that ‘unimpressed’ comment earlier too!” Before he could return his attention to Locke, the magician had already vanished from the stage along with his props. Eloise really was a pro at the magic game, coy personality or not.

Alex was walking with her father, who, despite being on friendly terms with Worsley, was immensely proud of his daughter. “See, Alex? I told you before that you have the ability to stand up for yourself. All you need is to do it.”

“I know Dad, you’re right. It felt so great to do it too. And I can’t wait ‘til I get to see-“ She gasped, excited to see Locke next to his truck a dozen or so yards away. “I’ll be right back Dad.” She ran off at a clip as her dad stood and watched, happy to see his daughter growing up.

“Mr. Locke! Hi!” A little startled, Locke turned around, looked down and was relieved.

“Hi there, little girl. You’re the one who stood up for me.”

“That I am. I’m really happy that I came to see your show tonight. It was incredible!”

“Thank you. That really means a lot to me, considering what happened. What’s your name?”

“Oh, um... my name is, uh, Alex!” She giggled, and composed herself “Sorry, I still get a little nervous when I talk to new people.”

“You? Nervous? I can’t say I believe that, what with all that in there. You really saved me in there Alex. I owe you.”

“Well, you could come back next year, maybe? That would be payback plenty for me.”

“Payback plenty eh?” Locke smiled, but let out a long sigh. “I’m sorry Alex, but I don’t think I’ll be coming back here any time soon. At least not with Worsley still around.”

“What?! But you heard Mr. Sawyer and them right? Worsley won’t be mayor for long, and you’ll be able to come back!”

“He might not be mayor, but I can guarantee he’ll still be around. Someone like that doesn’t just go away. He’d make it rather difficult for me to return, I’m sure.” He saw the expectant look on Alex’s face fade, which made his heart sink. “But I’ll tell you this, as powerful as Worsley might think he is, he can’t keep me out of other towns in the county. And if you’ll promise to be there, I can set up a show nearby. Deal?”

“Of course you’ve got a deal!” Joy filled Alex’s face as she smiled widely, and coyly put a up a hand to cover it.

“Hey now, keep that up and Eloise might end up losing her job.” Suddenly the horn honked, startling both Ben and Alex, as Eloise poked her head out of the driver’s side window.

“Benjamin darling, I’ve got the truck running. Hop in now.”

“Well, you heard her Alex. I can’t leave my beautiful Eloise waiting. You go back to your dad and I’ll see you again soon enough.” Ben trotted around the front of the truck and hopped into the passenger side. Eloise blew a kiss to Alex, and drove away.

Alex was sorry to see such interesting people go, but she took comfort in the fact that she would see them again someday. Running back to her dad she waved her hand as if she held a wand, curious if she could do magic like Locke some day.