

The Wizard's APPRENTICE



S.P. Somtow

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by S. P. Somtow

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1

A Magic Kingdom

In the city of Los Angeles, on the northern slopes of the Santa Monica Mountains, there lies a magic kingdom called Encino. It is a land of glittering shopping malls, Japanese bank buildings, sushi bars, and German cars, of video arcades, fast-food havens, and casually dressed people with wallets full of credit cards, of neon, palm trees, and smog.

Encino is often, by the casual tourist, mistaken for paradise, only those who live there know that all is not glitz and glitter. There is magic in Encino all right, but it is not in the shopping malls, sushi bars, Porsches, and credit cards. It is the kind of magic you can find anywhere, if you have the vision to see it and the courage to grasp hold of it and the strength of heart not to give in to the dark forces that guard it. For, you see, every kingdom is a magic kingdom, and every story, when correctly viewed, is about magic.

Except that most people never find out these things.

It is the first day of summer, in the final decade of the twentieth century, and a high school sophomore named Aaron Maguire is about to find out all about magic. He doesn't know it yet, of course, because school is out and magic is the furthest thing from his mind. When he's in a good mood he thinks about hanging out at the Galleria, trying to get Penelope Karpovsky to go out with him, and talking his father into letting him use his May Company charge card. When he's in a bad mood, he thinks mostly about his parents' impending divorce and what he's going to say when the judge finally pops him the question that hangs over his head like a personal thundercloud: *Who do you want to live with, Aaron? Your mom or your dad?*

For the time being, Aaron's parents are separated, but neither of them wants to give up the million-dollar house, halfway up the hill, with its commanding view of the San Fernando Valley and its enormous entertainment potential. Of course, neither of his parents has done any entertaining since they stopped getting along, somewhere around the time Aaron was in the seventh grade.

In the meantime, the house has been split off into two opposing "spheres of influence." The Cold War may be over, but something like it continues, in miniature, at the Maguires' house. There is a line through the middle of the living room, from the northeast tip of the Persian rug to the southwest corner of the Italian credenza. The line may be invisible, but its effects are as palpable as those of the former Berlin Wall.

The western half of the living room—his mother's side—is simply and tastefully adorned. The sofa and loveseat are in southwestern pastels, and a print by Chagall complements the ensemble. Aaron's mother is a buyer for one of the most exclusive boutiques in Beverly Hills, and her half of the house reflects what she does for a living: It's elegant, subtle, and never, never overstated.

Aaron's father's end of the living room, by contrast, is a jungle. On the wall is a frayed poster of the movie *Drenched in Gore*, which is billed as "featuring the gore-drenched effects of Hollywood's 'wizard of splatter,' Beau Maguire." On the floor is a three-headed latex monster built for the movie *The Beast That Threw Up Schenectady*. It's no longer operational, but it's still plugged into the wall, and occasionally, when there's a power surge or a brownout, it can be seen gnashing its teeth or clawing at the air. Against one wall is a battered green sofa with a pile of magazines; the cover of the one on top shows the selfsame beast in all its slimy splendor, with the caption: *Beau Maguire—The Wizard Bats a Thousand*. Next to the sofa, a door leads directly into a workshop that used to be a garage.

Aaron's mother's side of the house includes the back patio, with the jacuzzi; his father's side encompasses the swimming pool. His mother's side contains the library; his father's has the kitchen, which is a shame because his father doesn't know how to cook.

Since Aaron's parents have joint custody, Aaron has two rooms, one on either side of the house. During school, he lives with his mother during the week and with his father on weekends; during the school vacation, it's alternating weeks.

This week, the first week of summer, is one of his father's weeks. His parents' divorce is slowly inching toward a court hearing, and both parents' lawyers are trying to get hold of him. Aaron's not thinking about magic at all today. He just wants to get away. His mother is in Bangkok buying sapphires and his father's on a low-budget movie location somewhere in Tucson, but even though he's alone in the house he feels crowded because all the phones are ringing off the hook.

Maybe it's Penelope on the phone, but it's more likely to be one of the lawyers. He wants to pick up, just in case it is Penelope, but the likelihood is kind of small—maybe one chance in a million.

Better not to answer at all.

Aaron is pacing up and down the living room. He's cranked up the stereo but it doesn't seem to drown out the phones. They have four lines at the Maguire house—his mother's line, his father's line, a fax machine, and Aaron's own phone, which is shaped like a Porsche.

At last Aaron gets tired of listening to all the phones ringing. He marches from room to room, switching on all the answering machines, even his own. He turns the music up so loud that even he gets a little worried that his mother's Ming spittoon may fall off its shelf. Then again—since his parents are out of town—he could always tell them there's been an earthquake. A *little* one, you know, a four-point-five or so, not enough to make the news but *just* enough to send that blue-and-white seven-hundred-year-old spittoon crashing to the ground.

Aaron sits on the battered couch on the Dad side and rests his feet on a Louis XV ottoman on the Mom side of the living room—something he wouldn't dream of doing if either of his parents were home. The music washes over him and he starts to imagine the scene . . . the pieces of the spittoon all over the Persian rug . . . the car pulls into the driveway . . . "Mom . . . there was like, this earthquake." He's standing there, pointing to the floor, as his mother walks in from the hall, jet-lagged to the gills.

He hears his mother's scream of anguish, so piercingly real that it cuts through two hundred watts of heavy metal. He looks up. My God, he thinks, the spittoon has moved an inch or so closer to the edge of the wall unit, and the glass shelf is vibrating.

Aaron panics and turns off the stereo. The Ming spittoon wobbles to a stop. In the sudden pause, there comes a plaintive voice from the answering machine in his westerly bedroom. . . .

"Aaron . . . you wimp! Listen . . . I heard it from Mitzi,

who heard it from Gloria, who heard it from Buffy, who heard it from Brad . . . Is it really true that you're the one who sent me that secret admirer note last week? . . . I mean, cool! Don't you realize that I've been trying to get you to notice me for like a month?"

Penelope! Aaron thinks. He starts to run toward the bedroom. He trips over the beast that threw up Schenectady. He hears the refrigerator hum, realizes that when it draws power it causes an automatic brownout, and disengages himself from the beast before it starts to snap its jaws and lunge. He makes it to the corridor. The bedroom's only two doors down. The door's open and he hears Penelope's voice, closer now. . . .

"I bet you're home and you're just too shy to pick up the phone or something . . . so all I'm going to say is this . . . I'm going to be at the mall . . . I'll be standing outside the Thai-Israeli-Mexican Pizza Paradise in exactly thirty minutes and maybe you'll be there too . . . and maybe not. I hope you don't think I'm like being aggressive or anything, but this has gone on long enough . . . *Someone's* got to do something."

"Penelope!"

She hangs up just as he picks up the phone.

I've gotta get down there right now, he thinks.

Usually Aaron's pretty laid back, but he's not going to let an opportunity like this slip through his fingers. He grabs his skateboard from the closet and races out the front door, pausing only to set the burglar alarm before he dashes out onto Milagro Drive.

From Aaron's house, Milagro starts out steep, giving skaters that extra bit of acceleration, and then proceeds at an almost level grade until just short of Ventura Boulevard, when it dives into an unbanked corkscrew and an abrupt uphill curve around which it is possible to execute any number of precision moves. Even though Aaron's in a hurry, he can't help indulging in a few ollies, half-ollies, reverse, inverse, retrograde and free-form ollies, not to mention a few moves so

complex that they have no names. Not that Aaron's a champion or anything, but something happens to him when he leaps onto that skateboard. He is instantly transformed from a klutz into a kind of work of art. Rather like a Mozart allegro—lean and lyrical and lightning-fast.

You might almost call this transformation magic.

Today, though, the sonata is cut off in midphrase. Aaron swoops down, hits the dip of the uphill curve, soars up in a tornadoing twist, and bumps smack into someone who wasn't there only a second ago.

Me.

Anaxagoras. Wizard and recruiter of wizards. Ten thousand years old and fit as a fiddle. He doesn't know it, of course, but our meeting has been written in the book of fate since the beginning of time. Aaron looks up at me. He wonders why he can't just walk past me. After all, a blue Acura Legend just went careening past. But he can't squeeze by. It feels as though I've thrown a wall of Saran Wrap across Milagro Drive. It's not cellophane at all, of course. What I've done is cocooned him in a bubble of slowed-down time.

"Greetings, O Aaron," I say softly. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long, long time." This is a corny thing to say, but it's the kind of thing they expect, after reading too many high-fantasy trilogies and watching too many low-budget *Conan* rip-offs.

"Let go of me," Aaron says. "I'm totally in a hurry. Hey, here's a dollar. I mean, I know times are tough for you guys."

He hands me a crinkled bank note. He looks up at me, a tousle-haired blond boy with a winning smile and just a hint of acne; his eyes tell me that he has compassion. This is good. It is one of the requirements.

"Oh, Aaron, Aaron," I tell him, "I'm not one of the homeless. I am a powerful wizard. I have come from the dark dimension to seek out one who possesses the gift of wizardry, that I may train him to become as powerful as myself one

day, and to take his place among the great wizards of the transdimensional wizard council when my time has come and gone.”

He starts to laugh. “Look, mister,” he says—he’s looking for a polite way to brush me off, but bless him, he doesn’t want to hurt my feelings—“you hear a lot of strange stuff in this town, and I’ve met some people with some pretty weird job descriptions, but a talent scout for major league wizardry—I mean, give me a break! The girl of my dreams is waiting for me at the mall and I’m gonna miss out if I don’t make it down there in fifteen minutes. Just take the dollar, dude, I mean it.”

“You’d better take another look at that dollar,” I tell him, and he does, and he does one of those cartoon-type double takes, because I’ve spirited the dollar bill across the dimensional wasteland and replaced it with a freshly minted C-note plucked from the Treasury in Washington.

“How’d you do that?” he says.

“Smoke and mirrors. Mostly mirrors, in this case. Just a dab of smoke. Otherwise people don’t think it’s real.”

“I—” He starts coughing. I could have sworn I got rid of the smoke. Perhaps it’s only the smog. The air quality index is worse than usual today.

“Go ahead. Keep it. Plenty more where that came from. And now that I’ve got your attention . . .”

But I think I’ll let Aaron speak for himself now. After all, this is his story, not mine. A good wizard is seen and not heard . . . and a *great* wizard is neither seen nor heard. The best wizards do their work and vanish without a trace. Only the most observant of normal humans can detect the light flash of a magical mirror.

Or a telltale puff of smoke.

2

The Vision Thing

So there I was, fifteen minutes away from the most important meeting of my life, and a homeless dude was standing there telling me hey, I'm a wizard, a wizard talent scout, and you, kid, are the talent I'm scouting. I stood there with my skateboard under my arm holding a hundred-dollar bill that hadn't been there before, and I stared into the old man's eyes.

He *was* old, wasn't he? But he was already changing before my eyes. The tattered Hawaiian shirt was transforming into a cloak with stars and moons on it, and the stars *moved*; they whirled across dark emptiness. And his beard was longer, too. And whiter. The oddest thing was, a couple of people walked uphill, right past us, and they didn't seem to notice him at all.

"Five minutes," I said. "But after that I really have to

go. You have no idea how much this means to me." I looked at my watch. Maybe Penelope's would be running slow.

"Five minutes, one hundred dollars," said the wizard. "You drive a hard bargain."

"C'mon, please." I looked past him, wondering if there was a hidden camcorder in the oleander bushes. That's what it had to be, some kind of candid camera deal. My friends would see it on late-night MTV and make fun of me, especially since I'd forgotten to comb my hair. Hey, but it wouldn't be all bad. It was still free publicity.

Unless it was actually magic.

Well, I thought, maybe I'd better play along. "What makes you think I'm the one you're looking for?" I asked him. "I mean like, I even have trouble pulling rabbits out of hats and making coins disappear. I don't think I'd have much luck, you know, fighting dragons or whatever it is you dudes are supposed to do for a living."

"You're wrong there, Aaron. You have a lot of talent. How do you think you were able to manage that last retro-grade ollie?"

"Just practice," I said uneasily.

Well, Anaxagoras the Wizard whips out this solar calculator and does some rapid-fire finger picking of his own, and then he's all, "That, Aaron, is where you're wrong," and shoves the calculator in front of my nose.

This calculator: It had kind of an LCD screen, and on it was a video image of myself hurtling down Milagro Drive and hurling myself into the dip and boomeranging back up. There were mathematical figures dancing on the screen, and finally there was a tabular readout. This is what it said:

SUBJECT: Aaron Maguire

AGE: 16

INTELLIGENCE: Average to Bright

MANEUVER EXECUTED: Retrograde Ollie:
Alsatian Variation

LAWS OF SCIENCE BROKEN: 3 (Three)*

- a. Law of Conservation of Momentum
- b. Third Law of Motion
- c. Law of Gravity

*Newtonian physics used as basis for calculation

**PROBABILITY OF UNCONSCIOUS MAGICAL
FORCES:** 93.7%

"So you see," said the wizard, "I didn't say it; the computer said it. That makes it a fact."

I'm all, "Unconscious magical forces? What are you talking about? You mean I was using magic, and I didn't even know it?"

"It's very scientific," he said. "Some people have an intuitive ability to tap into the unseen dimensions and to draw out streams of energy. This energy can be used for . . . oh, tremendous things. Building rainbow bridges in the sky. Soaring through the night on wings of insubstantial air. And little things, like those deft little skating maneuvers none of your friends can ever quite imitate."

"But I'm not good at skating," I said. "My two friends Andy and Randy—now, *they're* amazing skaters. They've had their pictures in *Thrasher* magazine and they've been in two skateboard videos. Me, I can do a few tricks, but I can never do them twice the same."

"Precisely! You are *not* good at skating, my boy, but you *are* good at magic! Tell me, for example . . . how did you

manage to shut off the stereo in the actual fraction of a second that Penelope called you?"

"It was because of the Ming spittoon and . . . wait a minute! . . . How did you know about that?"

"And why did the Ming spittoon wobble its way to the very edge of the shelf just in time so you'd notice and not miss that phone message?"

"I—" This was beginning to sound dangerously convincing.

"A series of amazing coincidences such as would merit a ten-page monograph of the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*," said Anaxagoras. "And these things have happened before. Just when you think the world is about to end, you're pulled out of the frying pan by an uncanny bout of luck."

It was true. There'd been the time I was supposed to keep Dad out of the house because of a surprise party the people at the studio were throwing, and he insisted on running back into the house because he hadn't added enough brown sugar to the blood. I mean the special effects blood, which is made of corn syrup and food coloring. The brown sugar thickens it to the right texture so it'll photograph right. Anyway, he had to have three gallons of thickness B ready by the midnight shoot and he was having a spaz about it. And he turned right around at the corner and drove back to the house, but *just* as he got to the door (I was going to sprint over to the back patio to warn the party setter-uppers) an enormous bird flew by and doodooed on his head, delaying him long enough for me to give the requisite warning.

I wondered whether that was the kind of anecdote that went over big in the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*.

"Look, kid," the wizard said, and this time he was quite serious. It seemed to me that the whole of Milagro Drive was shrouded in mist. The mist was tendriling around fire hydrants, siphoning from the oleanders, wisping around the trunks of the palm trees. His eyes were glowing an eerie neon green. His voice was deeper, metallic, resonant.

Okay, none of this was that unusual for the son of a special effects wizard. The fog? A/B fog, my dad calls it. It's made by spraying two chemicals into the air at the same time. There's a chemical reaction that causes the fog to condense instantly—a very cheap effect, particularly common in low-budget films where it is necessary to hide the floor. A layer of mist is all the difference between an alien landscape and a sleazy downtown warehouse. The voice? Adjusting the EQ. The glowing eyes? Contact lenses—or atropine eyedrops plus an ultraviolet lamp.

I'd seen it all before. None of it fazed me. But I'm just as much a sucker for movie magic as any yokel from the boonies, and what the wizard had to say was compelling. I found myself just staring at him. Believing.

"Kid," he said, "you're a find in a million. You're the child of nature with the ability to see the Holy Grail where others see only emptiness." Child of nature? I thought. I tried roughing it in Yosemite once. Talked my dad into getting a motel room the next day. It turned out he hated the lack of air conditioning as much as I did; just thought it was the manly thing to do, you know, take your son out into the wilderness, male bonding, get in touch with the inner child, and all that. "Give me a few hours of your time. You'll still get back to the mall in time to see Penelope Karpovsky, I promise, for time is an elastic waistband on the jockey shorts of reality."

"All right." If he could make one dollar into a hundred dollars, he could probably make a couple of hours into fifteen minutes.

"You see, it's not just that you have this innate talent. About one in a thousand has these talents to the extent you have. But to become a wizard takes more than just talent. We look for certain other qualities too. Intelligence, to be sure . . . My computer pegs you at "average to bright," but we've had a number of "genius level" types go berserk and turn to the dark side. But compassion too. You notice that I drew a veil