

## Toss the Spell for Prayer

By

Lancelot Schaubert

*“In the war of magic and religion, is magic ultimately the victor? Perhaps priest and magician were once one, but the priest, learning humility in the face of God, discarded the spell for prayer.”*

— Patti Smith

Hayden and Toby, 1998

After my eleventh birthday, for the first time the cops arrested me for trying out some of my first magic. Actually, that’s not how it happened at all, but that’s what I like to say happened. I’d gone into Swifty’s gas station to get my dad one of his sports drinks and to try to get a lotto ticket that my dad didn’t need and a Yoo-hoo. I loved Yoo-hoo. Half my childhood looks like me sipping Yoo-hoo with legs dangling out over some scaffolding, watching the sun rise to the smell of sawdust and the echo of hammer falls in the deep places of Little Egypt, down in some fresh-dug cellar or on a high-pitched roof overlooking the lay of the land. Well I went in for supplies and bought whatever I could buy with my dad’s money down to the penny (Oatmeal cream pie? Ah yes thank you. Taquito? Don’t mind if I do). I came out arms as loaded as Ron Weasley before the Hogwart’s Express candy cart with Harry Potter’s blank check to back him up.

Outside the gas station stood two cops. One was the son of Chubbs Sanders who got onto Grandad Remmy once and the other was Officer Crypts, of the song *Put the Dog Down* (more on that later), of whom my brother’s best friend would one day say, “Say Crypts’ name three times and he appears like Beetlejuice, man. Don’t do it, man, don’t *do* it.”

Well I’ll do you one worse:

Not only did I say his name three times, but started disrespecting both officers, mouthing off and literally poked one of their gun belts. Not the gun, mind you, give me that much credit, but I poked the belt and said, “Look at the widdle ammo belt.”

“Kid, scat,” Officer Crypts said.

“I ain’t no whitetail,” I said.

“Okay,” Officer Sanders said. “I think he needs to learn how to be a bit more respectful.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said.

“You feeling okay, kid?” Officer Crypts said. “You look high.”

“High?” I asked.

“Like you been doing drugs.”

“Nah, man, I D.A.R.E. to keep kids off drugs!”

“Definitely high,” Officer Sanders said. “We’re gonna have to search your things.”

“Nope,” I said. “These are my Papa’s things and you ain’t touching them.”

“Gonna search’m.”

“No you ain’t,” I said. “You ain’t got a warrant.”

“Don’t care,” Crypts said.

I resisted when they reached for my Yoo-Hoo. “Don’t touch my freaking Yoo-Hoo, cop.”

“That’s it,” Sanders said. He pulled out his cuffs and slapped them one on my wrist.

“Aww come on,” I said.

He grabbed my other wrist.

I dropped my Yoo-Hoo and it shattered, painting the grey pavement chalky brown. “Come ON guys!”

Crypts started going through everything.

I got really, really angry. I started whispering to the handcuffs, reminding them of how they had once been something before steel. I asked the carbon to leave the steel and they became cold iron as charcoal dust fell at my feet. But they still worked well, iron though they be. We’d have to move beyond material causality. So I whispered again and reminded the iron of how it had once held something other than the form of cuffness, I reminded it of its origin, of its birth, of its womb in the motherlode deep in the Appalachian foothills. I felt it warping and changing its shape, clumping and unrefining itself, returning to its prime state — at least as iron. I wondered if I needed to go further, to return it to *prima materia*, but the iron clumped enough into ore deposits that they fell off in a mangled chunk of iron ore at my feet. I took off running at a full sprint.

No matter my speed, eleven-year-old legs cannot match up to the stride and speed of twenty-eight-year-old legs. Crypts caught me and tacked me to the ground, bruising my collarbone and scratching my arm against the rough asphalt so that it bled immediately, chunks of black in it.

“We’re taking you in,” he said. “Grab his stuff, Sanders.”

A backseat behind the grate.

A car ride to the station.

And I had landed behind bars.

Papa Bren was not happy with me. Not only had I become a nuisance to the “public,” whoever that was — wasn’t like coal miners and oil engineers lined main street shops anymore — but more importantly, I had become a nuisance to *him*. I’d failed to leave Swifty’s gas station with my dad’s sports drinks, lotto ticket, and my Yoo-hoo in a timely fashion. More than this, what would have disappointed or even annoyed or set him back now felt like an egregiously entitled offense: in addition to getting arrested, I had bought far, far more than I should have and an mushed oatmeal cream pie and a half-eaten taquito (guess the cops got hungry? Or greedy?) seemed far less appetizing in the halfflight of the stone walls that did not a prison make. The real prison was Papa Bren’s stone glare, the now-gross smell of gas station nourishment, the feel of disappointment.

That’s the thing about Southern Illinois: I didn’t just figuratively feel tied down to a bunch of unmagical stuff.

I felt literally tied down. Cuffed and barred.

Didn't help that they ramped up our time at the babysitter's: Hay seemed to really like Thelxy, at least at first. He didn't really communicate about why. "She's just nice to me," he said. "She gives me presents. Other babysitters don't."

While I was playing with magic, my brother was in the thick of trying to get a job. He wasn't just gonna wait around for some raven to come drop berries and honey into his open mouth, magic or no magic, Elijah's ravens or no Elijah's ravens.

Good Lord or no Good Lord.

So he went to get his first job, asked around to Papa Bren's friends at a Halloween party. Now this party was something to behold, let me tell you. This was still in the Blue House, I think, maybe the timeline's off, but we're going with it: at the Blue House. Now that I think of it, I know that's where it was, I'm just unsure if this is *when* it was, but all the same I know it was there because of the giant piñata we had upstairs and the how my friend Torin had dressed up as Arthur and I had dressed up as Robin Hood. Some older girl named Thelxiope — they called her Thelxy — who used to babysit us was up there with the Elisudd sisters, all older than the average age in the attic room, my bedroom, watching over us naughty little gnomes.

Fairies and monsters and ghosts and whatnot filled the room (not literal ones this time, just kids in costumes... at least I think it was just kids in costumes, who knows?) I remember Torin swinging that whiffleball bat blindfolded in his plastic Arthur armor over arcing south of the piñata, missing and missing further. And rotating further and further away from it. He angled and angled and then, blindfold and grinning, he wasn't aiming at the piñata no more, but right at the children behind him. Aiming right at the left bank of children who started screaming. "HE'S GONNA HIT US! AHHHHH!"

Torin really grinned then. He was the first one in the neighborhood to own a videogame consol.

I was over there, but just west of Torin.

My brother stood right in front of him. Hayden cowered, Hayden had this look of anxiety — not merely fear of the bat, but fear of the feeling of being afraid — that you ought never see on the face of a child, regardless of how old you are. I'd treated him poorly before, had beaten him when I was angry, and I immediately felt that old pang of regret.

I wouldn't let someone else beat on my brother as I had, God forbid. I ran over as Torin swung back a great haymaker, both elbows over the head right at my brother's face, an axe throw to hew the crowd of childer in two and half of my brother's dead body on either side. He swung it down quick and I tried to catch it.

I'd like to tell you I caught it. I would.

But I've always been terrible at sports that weren't baseball batting or running. I missed and it bounced off my palm and I started shrieking, howling in pain.

Torin immediately removed his blindfold. A second he had a smirk like he knew what he'd done and had accomplished his goal, but immediately either genuine concern or well-acted sympathy replaced it and he said, "Oh God, Toby, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hit *you*."

I was shaking the great sting out of it. "You meant to hit anyone in here and that's hitting me, Torin. Specially if it's my little brother."

Behind me a small voice whispered, “Thanks for saving me, Tov.”

“I got your back, Hay. Always will.”

Hayden slinked out, shoulders hung.

I knew the feeling: sucked having neighbor kids you thought of as friends trying to come and kill you. And I felt terrible that I’d betrayed him in the same way before. And I wondered if that was all.

Thelxy looked on.

Hayden started heading downstairs to the adult party.

“Where you headed?” Thelxy asked him.

He shirked back.

I came up. “Something wrong, Thelxy?”

“No, just checking on Hay.”

Hay looked at me. I didn’t like the look.

“He’s looking for a job,” I said.

“I can pay him for a job,” she said.

“No thanks,” Hay said.

Momma Danny’s in the stairwell, barely fitting because of her giant Diet Cola costume that Papa Bren’d handmade her. “Something wrong?”

“No,” said Thelxy. “Hay’s just looking for a job.”

“A job?” Momma Danny asked.

“A job,” Hay said.

“What do you need a job for?” she asked.

“Cause I don’t like people saying ‘poor Hayden.’ Now if you don’t mind, I have to shake some hands and kiss some babies.” He marched down the stairs.

I marched after.

Momma Danny awkwardly turned around like a barbershop pole and made her way down.

Thelxy looked on.

Hayden and I surveyed the room. See, this Halloween party hosted by Momma Danielle and Papa Bren encouraged families to show up with similar costumes. “Family themes,” I said.

“Or couples,” Hay said. “Torin’s mom’s the Wicked Witch.”

“Arthur ain’t in that story,” I said.

“Yeah, but the Tin Man is,” he pointed to Torin’s stock broker dad.

“If he only had a heart,” I said.

“He’s got a heart,” Hayden said. “He taught me to ride my bike.”

“No, dad did. He pushed me off on the last time.”

“Same difference.” Hay pointed to our great Aunt Gwen. “Raggedy Ann.”

“And Andy. Look it’s Grandad Remmy!”

We both laughed as Grandad Remmy and Aunt Mary showed up like Jack and Jill (Grandma Beth’d passed and Uncle Dean had to work late).

“Firechief Strong,” I said.

“And his fire,” Hayden said, pointed out his wife dressed up in netting that’d still be naughty about ten years later, meaning she meant to scandalize the whole crowd. “Dad’s is best.”

“Dad’s is best,” I agreed. And we both watched and Papa Bren and Momma Danny hosted everyone like twin nuclei that would not merge, like twin stars that wouldn’t quite fuze, bumping and jiving as close as their giant Cola and Diet Cola cans would touch. Pop’d taken these two old cardboard barrels used for storing aluminum and PVC pipe and had painted one cherry red and one bleach white and then had used an overhead projector to outline the logos for both Cola and Diet Cola. He’d painted those on in silver and red and white and then cut a hole where their head and arms would go.

“Well there’s all kindsa businesses, Hay, go get’m.”

In that kind of crowd — taste of nachos, sound of loud country rock, smell of beer brewed with rice — my little brother wandered looking for a job and started saying, “I’m Bren Broganer’s son, Hayden of this *very* house, and I’m available for employment.” It was the most professional thing he’d said or, likely, would ever say. For the ladies, he’d beg and barter and even steal for candy. We’d already hit up the neighborhood for trick or treating, but Hayden hit it harder than everyone, hitting it thrice. And then a fourth time at that party. “Kisses for candies, ladies,” he said.

A week later, Hay’d got a job unloading crates in the back of the local Farm Fresh (*Produce Plus*). He was able to sneak in there for some spare change where he wouldn’t have gotten paid — legally — at the IGA or something. But money under the table for a boy willing to haul and stack empty crates where the produce had gone? Sure, they’d throw some cash at that.

It worked out really well for Hayden. He brought home spare groceries from overstock, cash for himself (less a good chunk for the bags of candy he’d always smuggle — he added to the Halloween stockpile he’d kept, year after year.

And I should have stayed out of it.

I should have.

But I’d grown jealous.

Or maybe I just thought I could make up for the guilt of what I’d done by helping him with his job. Who knows what went through my head.

But I followed behind him, walking the whole way up Broadway and cutting through Boone and College there in Bellhammer until I got to the Farm Fresh right behind him — he didn’t see me the whole way, early as it was, quiet as I can be in a time and place like that.

He turned. “Tov?”

“I came to help, Hay.”

“Oh great.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Pick a crate.”

The stack was huge. “You get paid by the hour?”

“By the crate, Tov.” He started moving one at a time.

“Oh man, Hay, work smarter not harder.” I called the wind and asked it to weave in with the petrol that made the plastic. The whole stack of crates began to levitate.

“Tov...”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. I started moving them over the edge of the truckbed, all of them hovering, wobbling a bit, moving slowly towards the starter stack by the edge of the back wall of the joint.

“Tov, they’re not *all* empty, Tov, we don’t need to move them all.”

“It’s called overachieving.”

“It’s called being too dumb to know when to stop. There’s milk jugs in there too. I’m sposed to leave those alone.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. But managing a large floating tower of crates into which you’ve woven the west wind is not, as it turns out, fine. They started careening, then caterwauling, then they collapsed entire in a lumberous smash. The rest of the crates upended as floaty, wispy crates above them toppled into the small stack, into the stucco wall, beneath the rest of the floating ones so they became something like a prop or a ramp so that the bottom layers — those full of milk jugs — shot up and blasted end-over-end, dumping every single glass quart of milk and they exploded in a great white rush of waves and shards.

“Oooohhhh Tov...”

The screen door (which was more air than screen, more splinters than door) slammed open. Mr. Gates came out shouting. “What in the hell are you doing, Hayden?”

“I slipped,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“You just ruined about ten weeks of your wages worth of milk!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” he said.

“You’re fired, boy. Get out of here.”

“Yes sir.” Hayden ran off toward the bank drive-in window, crying.

“Hay, come back!” I shouted.

He ran faster and faster, round the brick corner and was gone.

I ran after him and hoped for the best. Running took me on several turns around various corners of harsh redbrick (it doesn’t give much when your elbow hits it, bone to brick) and I heard his steps up ahead, the way he stomped in the dirt as if he hoped to kick in the earth’s teeth and if running resulted, then fine. I turned another corner and saw him sitting on a water damaged old back porch, weeping. Just weeping the way little boys ought not weep.

“Oh Hay.”

“It’s all I want, Tov. It’s the only thing.”

“Oh Hay I really screwed it up.”

“Just... why?” He looked up at me, more blood than white in the veins of his eyes. “Why?”

I hated that he kept having to ask me that. “I just wanted to help you do good.”

“With magic?”

“I... I thought it would help.”

“Magic never helps here, big brovver.” He cried some more. “Never ever.”

“I mean... sometimes it does.”

“How’m I ever gonna provide if I get fired cause of you?”

I said, “Oh come on, Hay, you’re *nine years old*.”

“How’m I ever gonna do it? I’ll be a man in four years.”

I laughed. I shouldn’t have, but I did.

“Stop it!”

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s just... we’re so young, Tov. Life is very long.”

“Life’s short,” he said. “And bad things happen. And I have to get us safe. Safe house, safe job. I *have* to, Tov.”

“Something happen, Hay?”

He didn’t say nothing.

“Well what about courage? I don’t wanna be safe. I want the virtue of magical courage and the courage to use magic. None of these people understand it and they need to. They got to, Hay.”

“Sometimes...” He looked up at me and all the crying had gone clean out of him, eyes dry as deserts, he went frozen cold in his features. “Sometimes courage ain’t enough. Sometimes the bad comes anyway.”

“Hay, I told you I was sorry.”

“Not you,” he said and shook his head. “Not you. It’s so, so much more bad than you.”

“Someone’s hurting you like I did when we were kids?” *When we were kids*, listen to us, eleven and nine, *when we were kids*.

He looked tortured. He ran off.

Hayden and Toby, 1999

After you get arrested by local cops for minor magic spells, you start to wonder if anyone appreciates it at all. And once you get your brother fired for using magic to try and help him — a brother more infatuated by a normal tree than an enchanted ent — you really start to wonder if anything around you in the riverland has anything to do with magic whatsoever. You start to realize that carpentry can’t build an oak tree, that farmers can’t sow one, that other oak trees can’t sustain one. That there’s absolutely no reason for a tree. And yet... *trees*. As Dr. Thomas would say, “Fucking *trees*, man.” Not those kind of trees. Just the normal kind. The kind of trees our sister Avalona would lean up to that year and smell and say, “Such big pretty flowers, Hade. Such nice smelling flowers, Dobe.” Hay and Tov, for the record.

And I’d say, “Yeah, Ava. Real big, real nice-smelling flowers.”

You start to wonder what great and terrible, awesome and awful spell continues to be woven to hold up the firmament. What song rings out such trees? What incantation brings us all here? You start to wonder why NO ONE IN YOUR HOMETOWN CARES about such things. He and I were standing on the back porch of our babysitter Thelxy’s house. Seven of our other friends got babysat there and the house often smelled of boiled hotdogs, cheap mac and cheese, lemon Pledge, and rotting brown carpet. I liked Thelxy’s — I could justify watching Saturday morning cartoons and also doing weird research in different books without any fear of reprisal from the normal kids my age. Mitch was the only one my age and he didn’t really care much at all about anything but the roadkill on the road. Mitch grew up to be a mortician, for the record. Anyways, I’d mowed for our young babysitter Thelxy that day and we were sipping lemonade on the back porch smelling that fresh cut grass and the ripening tomatoes in the summer sun. “Where’s magic come from, Hay?” I asked.

“Why do you care?” Hayden asked me.

I pulled a phrase from Grandad Remmy's grammar stylesheet (not that he'd call it that... man that'd be hilarious if he'd have called it that): "Cause when I was your height and as scrappy as you, mom and Mimi and the aunts and uncles drove me up to The Fox."

"The Fox? Is he a magician? Like a talking fox like in Dr. Dolittle?"

"It's the name of a theater, Hay. They do shows in St. Louie. Around that time, I didn't believe magic was real. I felt skeptical of the tooth fairy and Santa and whatnot: I had no idea what myth was for, Hayden."

"Myth? Like a lie? And wait: are you saying Santa's not REAL?"

"No, no, no, no, no. A lie is a falsehood, false witness. A myth is a way of talking about the really real things through stories. Sometimes people argue over what's really real, but that's nothing to do with whether myths oughta be."

"I don't get it," he said.

Neither did I. At some point, you wonder if that's how you've always thought or if you used different words at that age. It's the problem with being the Narrator and the character. "Anyways, I didn't believe in any of that stuff. The truth of stories. It started quick and easy: Mimi took me and a young orphan girl named Page my age whom Mimi's best friend had adopted from the Gergian Megamesan hillcountry though Mimi and her friend thought Page from Vietnam. I found out otherwise in the back of the yellow station wagon, the one with the faux board runners, the back-facing seat."

"Mimi had a station wagon?"

"You don't remember this?"

"Nope."

"Oh yeah, man. Sitting in that back-facing seat, watching as the whole world swept away from us both, lights leaving and never showing their source. We talked about all kinds of little piddly things kids talk about: the size of nighttrees, the number of cars, the letters on signs. They took us to see Peter Pan at the Muny previews. Muny's in St. Louis — the largest Municipal Outdoor Opera House or performing arts center there is. There's lots of room in Forest Park and lots of money from lots of pilfered resources in the region."

"What's pilfered mean?"

"Stealing little things."

"Like candy from babies?"

"Like candy from babies."

"Mom does that," Hay said.

"I know. Sometimes it's just to clean up the ants."

"I know. But still."

"But still."

"But still," Hay said and giggled.

"But still Monsanto and farms, you know."

"Nope."

"Me neither. Well anyways I remember going and seeing this young girl play Peter Pan, which made perfect sense to me and still does, but seemed to anger some folks. But man when it came time to fly, she really flew, you know? She flew and flew. And me and Page just went all slackjawed and *wonny*."

What I conveyed in twelve-year-old-terms and sound effects was: “Well I knew I wanted more flying in my life after that and I’d grown to doubt my skepticism. That’s the thing, right? I couldn’t say, ‘There can’t be faith in miracles and magic because we don’t see any facts whose consequences are miracles and magic. The universe just came from non rational causes and chaos.’ And yet even that statement was rather miraculous. Doubt enters in because unless Reason holds an absolute position, that won’t work. Reason must be absolute or you can’t make rational arguments like that. Because Reason itself is a sort of magic, or maybe magic per se, not some by-product like a hidden accident. I couldn’t reasonably keep accepting that miracles and magic don’t exist based on reason, because reason has no natural cause. No faith, however small, stays rational if I can explain that faith, that belief, in nonrational causes. And if I wanted to believe that magic and miracles didn’t exist, then I believed that everything I believed came from nonrational causes: it had no point. So if that’s true, then nothing I believed came from reason. I had good reason to accept it *only* if it was the rational consequence of good evidence. So I had no good reason. If I wanted to believe in reason and reasoning, I couldn’t also keep believing that miracles and magic didn’t exist, because without miracles and magic, there’s absolutely no point for reason: nothing material, nothing with any sort of agency, human or otherwise, explains the existence of reason per se. Nothing. So I doubted, wire rigging or no, I doubted my unbelief in magic.

I doubted my doubts.

Around that time, I started playing around with magic kits.

Now this wasn’t real magic, and I knew that — it didn’t mess with the ends or forms or stuff that made up a thing. I wasn’t doing real magic, wasn’t upending, storyweaving or the regular kind, playing with ambience or linking or nicknaming or anything like that. Just messing with the human agency, the mechanics. I played around with these things because at least they worked like little tricks, little cantrips. Disappearing balls. Tapered decks. Movable knots. False thumbs. Double-barreled topmast. That sort of thing: mechanical and efficient explanations for the tricks. Mom and Mimi perked up and so they took me to a David Copperfield show. Now I still didn’t believe in magic, but I did believe in the whole idea of a magic *show*. Putting on a *show* of magic for the sake of entertainment, I’d gone that far. I watched specials and videos and what have you. I told my mother I wanted to go to the Matt King School of Magic, which I’d seen advertised on late night magic specials when that and poker and 9 ball started getting popular. In later years, I’d admit that I really wanted to go to every school and master everything, not for the sake of power or prestige, just for the sake of... something I couldn’t quite explain, you see. But nothing really filled in that hole because, deep down, I didn’t believe in magic and miracles. Even though I doubted. Even though this other argument formed up in my head. I doubted, but I had my goals: to continue forward unhindered until something told me or forced me to do otherwise.

Mom bought a simple ticket and the ladies in my family — all ten of them strong, powerful, loud, wealthy women. Well, when compared with the men anyways. Really when compared with the rest of the country, they were all as weak and lowly and unheard and poor as the rest of us. The real money and power and honor and pleasure would never reach any of us there in Little Egypt, but we did what we could with what we had and the opportunities came for women, generally speaking. At least in our county, I’m assuming in others, but maybe not. Steven King once said that his mother was one of America’s early liberated women, but not by choice. That’s mine. My female neighbors in Brooklyn couldn’t believe how much sway the women hold in my county. (They also started doubting their all-in bet on matriarchy, but

that's another story.) Anyways, me and my most favorite ten ladies in the world all on our way to a theatrical performance, ho ho, jolly good. Whatever you're supposed to say. *Shall we fight for the right to go to the opera now?*

"What'd you eat?" Hay asked.

"We ate sandwiches at this greasy deli — simple ticket, simple meal, simple car ride through the mundane countryside and all the way to The Fox."

"What's it look like?"

"Great red columns with their gilded corinthian tops leading towards the blue sky and blue dome. We settled into our crimson and gold chairs, then lights went low, and now all that mattered was the stage. Copperfield came on and started sawing a woman in half."

"WHAT?!"

"Only to put her back together again."

"Oh."

"He called us kids to the stage to make coins disappear and reappear. He sorted entire decks into black cards and red cards with a quick shuffle. Then we returned to our seats. I felt like my skin was swimming in itself, like my whole mind would short circuit and exit my pores as lightning. Like I had somehow grown quickly aware of something under the surface of all that trickery. That it worked like poetry, that it sung out the song of creation in harmony with all that exists, that it whispered the real answer to questions I'd asked my whole childhood: *why's the sky blue? And why's grass green? And why do the stars rotate slowly in the sky at night?* Questions that lesser answers to that other question of 'how' fared insufficient: reflection from the ocean, chlorophyll, the earth's rotation. None of those answered my questions. Because I wasn't asking "how," or "what." I wasn't asking for Latin rephrasing of the same question. I wanted to know *why?* In what form? For what purpose? From whom?

"Magic," I said.

"But why you care?" Hayden asked.

"Well," I said. "For his finale, he brought a massive Harley Davidson onto the stage and revved it so loud that it hurt my ears there in the front row. I squealed. They threw a great shiny silken sheet up in the air over him. The edges and corners of it fell first as would a parachute and as it settled, it became clear that nothing lay under the sheet anymore. They pulled it away and the moment we saw the bare stage, we heard that same deafening engine rev up behind us.

"David Copperfield. Riding *down* the aisle from behind us. In seconds."

I'm sure there's mechanics to all of that, efficient causes, whatever. But I'm telling you in that moment I was closer to the answer to the question 'why does a Harley exist?' than I ever could have gotten in discussions of its fuel efficiency or horsepower or internal combustion and vertical motion turning into rotational motion turning into forward inertia. Those discussions matter, but they don't ask the question: *whence come Harleys?* A Harley as an object in space is completely unnecessary. Completely. There's absolutely no reason for it to exist. And yet it does.

"Wow," Hayden said.

"Magic *did* exist. Magic *does* exist. I hadn't seen it on stage so much as used the poetry of the stage to teach me why I was sitting on a chair in a room full of people. There we were, even though we shouldn't be." Magic. Miracles. Everything in that room ought not to have been. And yet it was.

“Like something saved from a shipwreck,” Hayden said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Like something saved from a shipwreck.”

“A spoon becomes a shovel,” he said.

“Floss becomes bridge cable,” I said.

“Sails become sheets.”

“And a roof. And bandages. And hammocks. And sieves,” I said.

“What’s a sieve?”

“Strainer.”

“Why didn’t you just say strainer?”

“Cause a sieve does more than spaghetti. Like cheesecloth.”

“Mmmmm.... cheese. Yeah, I don’t like the idea of a shipwreck. I still would feel unsafe, even with really good magic.”

“Surely magic can help you some way, Hay.”

“I can’t think of how,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“The tub, the brick.”

I winced.

He looked up. “But also mom wants me to be funny all the time and my friends just want me smoking with them or playing music. I don’t really have a way to be safe without those. And magic doesn’t help either.”

“Wait, wait. There’s a lot there. So you’re smoking?”

“Oh sorry,” he said. “I’d never smoke a cigarette.”

“Oh okay. Wait. Then what are—“

“Just weed.”

“Just weed.”

“Just weed.”

“You’re ten.”

“You’re twelve,” he said. “So?”

“We’ll come back to that. What’s wrong with music?”

“Nothing, it’s just not a big deal around here.”

“Everyone loves music.”

“Well magic doesn’t help that, does it? And music was playing those times I got hurt, so...”

“Of course magic helps music, Hay. You can tune a guitar instantly by snapping your fingers and you’re only ten. How is that not helpful?”

“Cause I can’t play guitar like you,” he said.

“You’ll learn, little brother.”

“Okay so I’ll learn, big brother, but people don’t pay musicians around here. They only pay big artists.”

“Well that’s because they don’t think locally yet, but they will. And then you’ll have learned how to play guitar and then your magic trick with snapping your fingers will make everything quicker, tuning a guitar like that.”

“I’ll be fifty. How’m I gonna survive until then?”

“Well... maybe you can tell jokes?”

“Same problem, no comedians.”

“You’re ten, why are you worried about this?”

“Cause nothing’s safe,” he said. “Nothing’s shielded like in a tower.”

“Comedy’s a shield,” I said.

“Not when no one will talk to you about something serious,” he said. “Mom’s always asking for jokes after the last one I told.”

“What was the joke?” I asked.

“Bob was removing some engine valves from a car on the lift when he spotted a famous heart surgeon, who was standing off to the side, waiting for the service manager. Bob, somewhat of a loud mouth, shouted across the garage, ‘Hey ...Is that you ? Come over here a minute.’ The famous surgeon, a bit surprised, walked over to where Bob was working on a car. Bob in a loud voice, all could hear, said argumentatively, ‘So Mr. fancy doctor, look at this work. I also take valves out, grind ‘em, put in new parts, and when I finish this baby will purr like a kitten. So how come you get the big bucks, when you and me are doing basically the same work?’ The Doctor, very embarrassed, walked away, and said softly, to Bob, ‘Try doing your work with the engine running.’”

I laughed. “Tell another,” I said.

“See?”

“What?”

“All you want is jokes, you don’t want to talk. I can’t be safe to be me.”

“Ah. Well maybe I can find a spell that can make you safe.”

“That’d be nice,” he said. “But you have kind of a bad score when it comes to using spells around me...”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just need to figure out where they come from so that I can learn how to control them. Or make them better. Any ideas?”

“Church?” Hay asked.

“You think anything magical’s, anything other than boredom’s, ever gonna happen at our church?”

“Try the Pentecostals.”