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Your favorite childhood television program feels like a fever dream.

You don't remember it at all until I start humming the theme song and then—oh, I can see it in your eyes. That wash of images, ideas, feelings.

Because that's what you remember. Not the title of the show. (Was it *Mister Magic*? *The Magic Show*? *Magic Time*? Everyone will tell you something slightly different.) Not any of the plots or individual episodes. Not even the names of the six children who were as real to you as your own friends.

You only remember how it made you *feel*.

The excitement when those kids stood in a circle in that featureless black room, said the magic words, and then threw that ephemeral cape up into the air. The terrible, delicious tension as you watched it drift down, impossibly slow. Waiting. Hoping. Always with the strangest undercurrent of fear that maybe *this* time it would fall straight to the floor, nothing special or wonderful revealed, the magic lost. And then a release of breath and clapping as the cape elegantly defines the sudden figure of Mister Magic himself.

He's an impression more than he's a man. Top hat, looming presence. The black background coming to life with just a splash of red on the underside of his cape.

What did Mister Magic look like? He was tall and enormous. He was slight and lithe. He didn't have arms or legs. He was all arms and legs. He was a person. He was a puppet. One thing everyone agrees on is that we never saw his face. But don't you remember—you saw it once, didn't you?

Did you?

The one exception to our failing memories of the show: the theme song. You still know it all these years later.

Go on. It's right there. I'll start.

Take my hand

Stand on your mark

Make a circle

In the dark

Close your eyes

And wish with me

Keep them closed

And now we see

Magic Man!

Magic Man!

Magic Man!

He's here for me!

Doesn't it feel good to sing it, to have the magic back for a moment? The magic that was always there for you, that always worked.

Until the day it didn't.

Across the internet, you can find people who swear—and this isn't possible, because the show wasn't broadcast live—that they saw it. *Saw* the episode the cape fell and hit nothing. And then saw little Kitty, the smallest of the circle of friends, scream. (You didn't remember it was called the circle of friends until you read it just now, and it feels like a puzzle piece settling into place, doesn't it? That circle, those friends, your friends.)

Some swear they saw Mister Magic disappear on the spot. Some

swear they saw the sets crumble to the ground. Some swear they saw the whole place catch on fire. (The fire took place later, after the show ended.)

Obviously, none of the people posting their vivid memories actually watched anything violent on their screens, but their spongy kid minds filled in that gaping darkness, that absence where Mister Magic had been. Where the magic, at last, failed.

But that's the thing about childhood memories. We can't trust them. And, in the case of *Mister Magic*, we can't verify them, either. Try to look up any version of the title on YouTube. It's not there. You can't find copies, bootleg or otherwise, anywhere. So, you remember the show, but you *don't*.

Absent recordings, or scripts, or literally any ephemera from when it aired, I've got the next best thing:

The circle of friends.

Back together, at last. Thirty years after tragedy shut down production and they were flung out of their loving magic circle and into the real world—whatever that meant for them.

Some were easy to find, excited to reminisce and reconnect. And some were deliberately impossible to track down. But I have a little magic up my sleeve.

It's the television reunion you didn't know you needed. And, now that you're humming that song, trying to figure out if you ever *did* see Mister Magic's face, thinking about how those kids felt like your best friends—now that you're remembering—you've never needed something quite this much, have you?

Me neither.

And so, dear friends, at long last . . . it's Magic Time.

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ONE

The thing is, the doors were open that morning.

Val knows—she knows, she *knows*—that waking up to find both doors of their sagging cabin opened wide to the world is probably only because Dad wasn't sleeping well, and that she should tie a bell to his foot before bed tonight. Just in case.

But.

An open door is an invitation, she whispers to herself. And she keeps the doors to their cabin firmly closed all the time. She'll have one of the ranch hands rig up some sort of lock system, up high, where Dad won't be able to reach it.

That'll fix it. She can stop worrying.

She doesn't, though. She worries through the morning riding lessons, worries through lunch with the camp full of awkwardly pubescing little delights, worries through the early-afternoon group activities, more riding, cleanup. All her favorite things—especially the cleanup, knowing parents are paying a small fortune so their daughters can spend the week doing the chores Val hates most—are eaten up by the worry.

By late afternoon she's mostly shaken it off, though. Sometimes an open door is just an open door. It doesn't have to mean anything.

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One of the girls, Lola, freckled and sunburned and wonderful, raises her hand. “Miss Val?”

“You know where the bathroom is,” Val answers. “You don’t have to ask when you need to go.” It’s almost time for pickup, which means she needs to get Poppy from the goat pen. The other five dusty and happy and tired campers are here with Val, finishing up in the stables.

“No!” Lola giggles shyly. “It’s not that. Do you have any kids?”

An image flashes in Val’s mind. A girl, even younger than these, her brown hair forever fighting to escape messy pigtails, with eyes so blue they break her heart. Val smiles. “Not yet, but I know there’s one in my future.”

“How?” another camper, Hannah, asks, wrinkling her nose beneath smudged glasses. Val resists the impulse to clean them for her. Independence is part of what her camps promise, even if it means dirty glasses. Val’s been running the summer programs for Gloria’s Ranch since she was twenty, and they’re the absolute highlight of her whole year.

Val shrugs. “I’ve always known.”

“But aren’t you getting too old?”

Val lifts an eyebrow. Lola scowls and elbows Hannah, but Val shakes her head. “No, it’s okay to ask questions. Questions are how we get to know the world. And the answer is, I’m not too old. Not yet.”

Her heart ticks like a clock, but she still has time. Val’s belief in her blue-eyed girl is as solid as her belief in gravity. The when and the how are questions she doesn’t let herself ask. It’s easy not to ask questions. Take the question, put it behind a door. Close the door. Leave nothing open. She is aware of the hypocrisy of always encouraging her students to ask questions when she denies herself the same freedom, but there’s a whole door in her head just for the cognitive dissonance of *Do what I say, not what I do*.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Lola blurts out, and suddenly this interrogation makes sense. Lola’s father finds excuses to linger at every drop-off and pickup.

“Only when I want to,” Val answers. “Sometimes I have a girlfriend.” Though *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* are generous terms for the relationships she allows herself to have.

Still, her answer has the desired effect of rapidly changing the subject as all the girls’ eyes go wide. Val can see the follow-up questions bubbling, but they don’t have time. She has to get to Poppy before—

“Damn it,” Val whispers under her breath. Poppy’s mother has already pulled up in a Mercedes SUV that has about as much functionality as the designer boots she sent Poppy in for the first day. And Poppy’s still in the goat pen instead of the stables.

Val claps her hands. “Okay! Last one out of their barn clothes has to muck out Stormy’s stall tomorrow!”

The girls shriek and dart away to remove the coveralls and boots Val gives them to protect the too-cute clothes their parents always have them wear. Val cuts across the dusty path to intercept Poppy’s mom before Poppy hears what’s about to happen.

“Hi,” Val says. She can’t recall the woman’s name. She never can with other adults. It’s hard to care.

The sunglasses come up, pushed onto carefully styled hair. “What’s Poppy doing in the goat pen?”

“She’s working with our baby goats, Luke and Leia, training them to—”

“I’m paying you for riding lessons!”

Parents always trot that out as leverage, but technically she isn’t paying Val at all. Val doesn’t get paid. She smiles politely. “You’re paying for a week of day camp at Gloria’s Ranch, which includes experiences with a variety of animals. And *can* include riding lessons, if the girls want that, which Poppy does not.”

“It’s not up to her! I want her to learn how to ride!”

Val resists the urge to smack the sunglasses off the woman’s head. “Poppy is spending a week outside building confidence with friends and animals. Do you want me to force her into a saddle and watch her have a panic attack? Because that’s not safe for Poppy or the horse.”

“But I’m *paying*—”

“No.” Val cuts her off. “Look at your daughter. Right now.”

Poppy’s perched on top of a bale of hay, expression intense with concentration as she balances next to a tiny baby goat. She gives a command, then jumps off and turns around expectantly. The goat follows. Poppy whoops in delighted triumph.

“But—” the mom says, her anger deflated in the face of Poppy’s elation.

“She’s afraid of horses. It’s a perfectly rational fear. Horses are terrifying creatures. Barrel chests and pin legs and have you *seen* their teeth?”

The woman raises a perfect eyebrow. “It sounds like you’re scared of them.”

“Oh, absolutely I am. I ignore it because I have to. But there’s no reason for Poppy to overcome this particular fear. No one *needs* to ride horses. She’s a remarkable little girl, and when she grows into a remarkable adult, she’ll remember how her mother listened to her and helped her find other things she was good at.”

The woman sighs out the last of her anger. “She does look happy.”

“And filthy.” Val wrinkles her nose. She’s not even pleased that she convinced this woman she was right. It was always going to go this way. When Val sets her mind to something, it happens.

The woman laughs, fully won over. “And filthy.”

“Poppy! Into the barn!” Val points and Poppy hops across the pen like a little goat herself.

“I really wanted to buy her cute riding clothes,” her mother says, wistful.

Sometimes Val forgets that adults are just children with both more and less autonomy. She smiles slyly and nudges the woman with her shoulder. “You know, we have riding classes for adults, too, and *you’d* look fabulous in a new riding outfit.”

Val’s rewarded with another laugh and a thoughtful glance toward the stables. The woman’s already picking out which horse is pret-

tiest, probably imagining owning one herself. Good for business if she stables it here.

What would we do without you, Val? Gloria asks in her mind, and Val thinks back what she always does: *You'll never have to find out.*

It tastes bitter today.

Putting her feelings aside, Val oversees pickup. She's careful to keep her distance from Lola's dad, who had definitely prepped his daughter to ask about Val's relationship status. She never dates people where attachments will form, which makes anyone with children off-limits. Val remembers every child she's taught over the last eighteen years; she knows *she'll* be the one to get attached. Fortunately, Poppy's mom monopolizes her time and Lola's dad leaves, disappointed, with the rest of the kids and parents.

Val does one last check of the stables, making sure the gates are latched and everything is put away. "Until tomorrow, you enormous nightmare beasts," she says, saluting the horses and flipping off Stormy for good measure. Near as she can tell from the ranch hands, every stable has a Stormy—a surprising number of which are also named Stormy. But knowing that Stormy isn't an anomaly doesn't make her like the rotten mare any more.

The goats are in great shape, thanks to Poppy, so Val sets off across the field, past the big house toward the cabin she shares with her dad, same as when they came here thirty years ago.

Thirty years. *That's* it. That's what's nagging at her, setting her off since this morning. It's August 1, which marks thirty years since they arrived at the ranch and never left again. She undoes her thick, dark braid where it coils down her back. It feels heavier than normal.

She'll take a long shower—assuming the water heater is working. It's almost as old as she is, but she works every day, so why can't it? Then she'll read to Dad and get him to bed, then find one of the hands to come help figure out a new lock system.

The sun's low and blinding behind the cabin, so she doesn't notice until she's nearly there that the front door is gaping open.

Val doesn't want to go in. Can't go in. The open door is a vulgar invitation. Whatever's waiting is as bad as anything—almost anything—that's come before. It takes all her tremendous will to put one foot in front of the other. She can't tell herself it's just an open door. She knows better.

Open doors swallow you whole.

She stops on the weathered front porch step, the silence inside the dim interior overwhelming. Words like an icy breath on the back of her neck come to her.

And when you're in trouble and need a friend's hand, just reach out and whisper, you know that you can . . .

It's like finding the deepest, darkest hole, and sticking her arm in. Knowing something will take her hand. Knowing it's been waiting for her to reach out and ask all this time. Knowing full well that when she does, she can't control what answers on the other side.

Val puts one trembling hand through the doorway into the beyond. "Please," she whispers. "Please." It's as close to praying as she's ever come. She holds her hand still and waits, but nothing takes it. Nothing answers her plea.

She steps inside and none of it mattered, anyway. It never mattered. The open doors were a warning, but she was wrong about the message. Nothing had gotten in. Something had gotten *out*. Escaped, and left her alone.

Dad's dead.

Subject: Reunion??

Hi, guys.

Yes, it's really me, and yes, it's really legitimate. We're going to have a reunion in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the show. I've vetted the podcast. I think they'll do a good job honoring the show's legacy.

The easiest thing would be to fly into the Salt Lake City airport and then take a commuter flight down to Saint George, rent a car, and drive from there. I'd pick you up but my schedule is a constant disaster. Who knew having six kids would be busy? Lol

But if you coordinate your travel schedules, you could drive in together. More efficient and cheaper. Don't worry about the cost, though. The podcast's sponsors will reimburse you. Within reason, obviously. I'm attaching directions to the house. I know it's late notice, but I think it's important. A lot of people never got closure. Including us. Especially us.

I hope you'll come. I really have missed my friends.

Yours,
Jenny

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TWO

“I still remember the first night he showed up, carrying you.” Gloria stares out the window over the sink. Her hands are sunk into soapy water, but she’s not really washing anything. The day outside is brilliantly sunny, a riot of green and gold life, not at all funereal. Gloria’s eyes are misty behind blue-framed glasses, carefully matched to the blue eyeliner that, like her hairstyle, she committed to in the 1980s and never abandoned.

Ostensibly Gloria was taking care of all the arrangements, but that really just meant she directed while Val did all the work. That’s how it’s always been between them, and preparing the big house for mourners is no different.

Val doesn’t mind. She doesn’t know what she’d do without a task, without work. She doesn’t know how to feel this . . . whatever *this* is. Is it grief? It vibrates closer to anger. If she were one of her campers, she’d tell herself to take her time, that she’s allowed to feel how she feels. But she doesn’t know how she feels, or even how she wants to feel.

Dad’s dead, and she has no idea what that means for her. What it changes, if anything. He’s been gone a lot longer than he’s been dead. It felt so strange, seeing him lying there, peaceful. In nice clothes, and without his omnipresent work gloves. She never saw

him without gloves on. His hands were so small without them, so frail. Puckered and pocked and terrible to look at. She wishes she hadn't seen them.

Wait. "Carrying me?" Val came here when she was eight. Why was he carrying her?

"We all worried about you, you know," Gloria says, lost in the memory. She pulls a glass from the soapy water as if puzzled by what it was doing in there. "You didn't speak, not a word. Not for that entire first year. I'd find you sometimes, standing in the middle of a field, eyes squeezed shut, left hand clutched in a fist with your right hand over it like you were holding it closed. Always that same pose. I wondered if you were maybe, well. You know." Gloria taps the side of her head like it explains the rest, leaving a cluster of soap bubbles on her temple.

"Dad never talked about—" Well, anything. What did they talk about, back when he could still talk? The day's tasks. A notable detail from whatever nonfiction he was reading. Nothing that mattered, nothing that had any real emotion attached to it. There were the rules, and the rules were unassailable. He only got mad at her when she tried to break them, like when she'd sneak here to watch television with Gloria's older children. *It's dangerous*, he'd shout, marching her back to their lifeless cabin.

Dad considered a lot of things dangerous, though. School. Friends. Doctors. Val rubs her wrist where there's an extra bump in the bone from a bad break at twelve that Dad set himself. She tugs the sleeves of her borrowed black dress lower, to cover the bump and the scars. People will be arriving soon, and she doesn't want questions. Guess she still has a lot in common with Dad that way.

Today at the cemetery was the first time she'd been off the ranch so far this year. Sometimes she forgets that the rest of the world is out there, big and bright and noisy. Dad made the ranch their whole life, and it really isn't a bad life, but.

But.

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Dad's gone and it's not *their* life anymore. It's just hers. How does she feel? A ghost of the resolve she felt on her thirtieth birthday drifts past her. She was going to leave, and then Dad had his stroke. No doctors. Only her. And so she stayed, and she's still here, and the version of herself determined to set out is as dead as Dad is.

"We'll need more than that." Gloria is eyeing the stack of plates Val put on the counter.

"Why?" The graveside service was small, just Gloria and a couple of her children who could make it, plus three of the ranch hands that like Val. They didn't really know Dad, since he couldn't get around well the last few years. But they were there for her, which she appreciates.

Gloria dries her hands and reaches into the cupboard for more dishes, handing them to Val. "I put the reception details on my Facebook."

Plates shatter on the floor. Val stares down past her empty hands at the broken pieces. "What?"

Gloria delicately steps around the ceramic shards and takes Val's hands in her own, their calluses a matching set. Her voice is gentle, the same way she talks to Stormy when the horse is worked up over nothing. "He's at rest. Safe, now. No one is going to come for him."

Gloria pats her cheek and then goes to the closet for the broom. Gloria is old-school Idaho with a healthy distrust of the government, letting Val drive as soon as she could reach the pedals, never caring about licenses or employee taxes or anything official. That disdain for paperwork extended to the man who worked for her as a teen, then showed up a decade later with an eight-year-old. As far as Val could tell, Gloria didn't bat an eye about taking them on, didn't question why he couldn't be legally employed, or why he wouldn't enroll his daughter in school, or why they stayed put and stayed hidden. She probably assumed that he had done something illegal, which, in her opinion, was in the same thing as *wrong*. After losing a beloved brother to AIDS, Gloria stopped listening to

other people's definitions of good and bad, trusting her own judgment that told her Val's dad was a good man.

But the thing Gloria doesn't get, the thing she's never thought to ask—

Were they hiding for his sake, or for Val's?

A fear coils in Val, locked behind the oldest, thickest door. It whispers that *she's* the reason they've been hiding for thirty years. Not her dad.

What did you do? her mind shouts, but it's not her voice that yells it. She doesn't know whose voice it is, but she knows whatever she did, it was bad.

She's bad.

Dad knew what she did. And he watched her so carefully, and he kept her here. *Safe*, he'd say at the end of the day. *Safe*, instead of good night, or I love you. She never knew if he meant they were safe, or the rest of the world was.

She asked, once. About where they came from. About whether she had a mother, more family.

He had looked so terrified that his fear had claimed her, too.

"Gone," he had whispered. "Don't ask again."

Val was afraid, so she never did. And as the years passed, the fear didn't fade but she grew into it. Grew around it. Grew stubborn and strong-willed, ignoring the shape of the fear at the core of her. And even though she wanted to know, *needed* to know, how her mother died, she wasn't going to ask. Not ever.

Now Dad's gone, too. It's a door she can't open again, and she has regrets. So many of them.

No matter. She takes the outstretched broom from Gloria and sweeps up the remains of the plates, then finishes preparing trays of food and pitchers of drink. What a funny custom, when someone dies, to feed other people. To nourish and comfort them when she's the one whose entire world is in a cemetery twenty minutes away.

Gloria was right about the plates, though. More people show up than Val had expected. So many of her summer camp and riding

students, some still children, some fully grown adults, which makes her feel dizzy and vaguely panicked. If they're that old, how old is she? But it's lovely to see them, lovely to have this reminder that their summers together meant something to her students, too.

Local ranch hands from the last three decades appear as well, hats in hand, wearing their nicest jeans and cleanest boots to pay respects to her dad. They seem to have known a different man than she did. One who was friendly and funny. One they cared about, one they speak about with fond gratitude.

And now she knows, at last, that the feeling threatening to drag her breathless to the floor is sadness. Her father should have had this while he was alive. Friendship. Companionship. A sense of his place in the world.

Val should have had it, too. Gloria's shiny, slippery floral couches are full in the living room, the den is packed with milling people, the heirloom Turkish rug in the dining room shuffled over with dozens of pairs of feet. The big house is an old design, eschewing modern openness for modular separation. Traveling from one space to the next feels like a shock every time.

She'll have so much cleaning to do after, but it's worth it to see this evidence that Dad existed. That he mattered to more people than just her. And seeing so many of her past students gives her hope that maybe she matters, too.

It also eases her worry. No police have come knocking, no SWAT teams descending on the ranch with a decades-old warrant for her arrest. So far the only bad thing to come of Gloria breaking the rules and posting Dad's name on her Facebook is that Lola and her hopeful father are here.

Val sees Lola's father searching in the entrance to the dining room, so she ducks through the kitchen and back hallway, checking that the guest bathroom is still in good shape before returning to the main entry. Maybe she'll escape upstairs for a bit.

The front door is hanging wide open, though. Scowling to ignore the spike of fear it triggers, Val closes it. She's definitely going

upstairs. At least until Lola and her father leave. She doesn't trust herself to be kind right now. *Smile, be sweet! To all that you meet! A girl who is good, does just as she should!* Val rolls her eyes at the old rhyme that always pops into her head in situations like that. Watching Gloria run her own ranch taught Val that she never had to defer to men or apologize for her existence.

Still, that rhyme lingers. Val doesn't owe anyone a smile. Not ever, but especially not today.

She turns and nearly bumps into someone. He's white, lanky or gawky depending on the generosity of the viewer, but Val tends to be generous with people. They're all interesting in their own ways. He has a beard in place of a jawline, thick and dark like his hair, and his rectangular glasses disorientingly magnify his hazel eyes. Their gazes meet.

Something claws free in her chest, a burrowing creature bursting to the surface.

He drops his glass with a thud, spilling water on both their shoes. He doesn't even look down. His eyes are a spotlight, pinning her in place. She knows him. How does she know him?

"Valentine," he says, so softly it sounds like a secret.

It takes her a moment to realize why it's so shocking: No one here knows her as Valentine. On the ranch, everyone assumed Val was short for Valerie, and Dad encouraged it.

So that means—

She remembers, now, that year she spent not talking. She had been *terrified*. So terrified she couldn't think, couldn't see, couldn't speak. She can't say what she was afraid of, but the fear—the fear, she remembers. That fear is back, a fist in her throat.

Once again, she can't speak, can't do anything but be pinned in place by those eyes.

She's too shocked to move as his fingers slip between hers. It feels like climbing into bed at the end of the longest day.

"I can't believe I finally found you," he says, and before she can catch her breath to ask how he knows her—how she knows him—he bursts into tears.

OMG did anyone else see there's a new podcast on Mister Magic? The first episode is up and there's going to be an actual reunion with the last cast!

@imreadyru Dude I haven't thought about that show in ages!! I used to hurry home from kindergarten every day so I wouldn't miss it! I'd always steal my dad's reading glasses and pretend to be what's-his-face! He was my favorite friend.

@imreadyru Link?

@imreadyru Really, all that's going on in the world right now and you're posting about a reunion of a children's show no one remembers

@imreadyru @chk234523 if no one remembers it then how do you know it was a children's show, lighten up

@imreadyru Do they say which cast members they have?? Wasn't Ronald Reagan on it???

@imreadyru @homeboy562 pretty sure Ronald Reagan is dead so I doubt he's going to pop up on a podcast, though the Reagans were into seances so who can say

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BUCKLE MY SHOE

“Oh my god.” A new man takes in the entryway scene. Val’s still holding hands with the stranger. She feels as though she’s been caught doing something shameful. This new man has jet-black hair streaked with elegant silver at both temples, and his suit fits like it was made for him. His shoes are burnished to a shine that makes Gloria’s carefully polished floors look dingy.

“Isaac, what did you do?” he asks.

Isaac. The name slots into a space in Val she didn’t realize was empty. Isaac. The man with the glasses, holding her hand and crying.

Isaac releases her. But he’s laughing as he wipes under his eyes. She has the oddest impulse to take his hand again, a spike of panic that she’s lost something precious. “Sorry. Sorry, just—it’s been so long, you know?”

Val doesn’t know. She looks to the other man for help.

He raises an eyebrow. He’s got dark-brown eyes, olive skin, and a smile that looks as expensive as his suit. He’d be at home on one of Gloria’s soap operas that Val sometimes catches glimpses of.

Apparently, her confusion is obvious. His voice is soft, almost hurt, as he says, “You don’t recognize me, do you?” He puts a hand over his heart like he’s been shot, but then his tone becomes smooth