

The Fat Man and the Magician

by Tom Joyce

The Fat Man took a sip of whiskey, then replaced his glass on the table next to his fedora.

"I have a job for you," he said.

"I don't suppose I have a choice," The Magician said.

The Magician, tall and elegant in his tuxedo, flicked some ash from his cigarette into the metal ashtray before him. The Fat Man kept his eyes on The Magician's long-fingered hands, making sure they didn't come anywhere near his glass. Didn't hurt to be cautious. The guy was good. Otherwise, The Fat Man wouldn't be wasting his time here.

"You have a choice," The Fat Man said. "You can refuse, and your wife and kids can find out you're a cocksucker."

On the nightclub's stage, a slim blonde belted out a sultry version of Peggy Lee's "Fever." Forty minutes earlier, The Magician had occupied that stage. There, he'd produced coins and silk streamers from the air. He'd linked seemingly solid metal rings together, then unlinked them. He'd invited a woman from the audience to select a card, which she'd subsequently been unable to find in the deck again. The Magician had directed her to look under the napkin beneath her martini glass back at her table, and there it had been.

"I've seen your wife," The Fat Man said. "Quite a dish. Shame to let a looker like that go to waste."

"I don't 'let her go to waste," The Magician said. "I love my wife. But I have certain needs that she can't fill. You wouldn't understand."

"You're goddamn right I wouldn't," The Fat Man said.

He glanced back at the stage approvingly. That blonde singer looked and sounded like a young Peggy Lee, who was a bit

long-in-the-tooth for The Fat Man's tastes these days, but had been a fine piece of ass in her prime.

"May I ask who it is?" The Magician asked.

"A union leader," The Fat Man said. "Commie pinko piece of shit."

The Fat Man finished off his whiskey. He motioned the waiter over. The waiter's white dinner jacket, juxtaposed against the nightclub's dim interior, his black pants, and his own black skin, gave the disconcerting impression of a ghostly disembodied garment bobbing around on its own. The Fat Man ordered another whiskey — his fourth of the evening.

The Magician sipped from his icy martini glass.

"Interesting," said The Magician. "And will the vial have the same contents as the one I slipped into Dalton's beer?"

"None of your goddamn business."

The Fat Man pulled a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and mopped his forehead. The smoky air around him seemed close and suffocating.

"Maybe not," said The Magician, stubbing out his cigarette. "But I must admit, I'm curious. When you told me to wear gloves and not let any touch my skin, I assumed it was a particularly strong poison. I expected Dalton to die immediately. So I was surprised to see him finish his beer and walk out."

The waiter returned with a whiskey glass on a tray. The Fat Man looked up and stifled a surprised yelp. The waiter was Dalton, glaring down at him. He shut his eyes. Opened them again. No, it wasn't Dalton. The waiter set down the glass and The Fat Man took a long pull from it.

"You read the papers," The Fat Man said. "Dalton took a dive from a hotel window. Suicide."

"'Psychotic episode.' I believe that's the phrase the newspaper account used. A mental breakdown after I spiked his drink? That seemed like quite a coincidence."

"Good fucking riddance. Dalton was a communist. Probably working for Moscow."

"Really?" said The Magician. "I was under the impression that he was just trying to secure civil rights for his people."

"Didn't know you were such a nigger lover," The Fat Man said.

He took another gulp of whiskey. Then he chortled.

"I hear they're all hung like horses," The Fat Man continued. "That why you like 'em so much?"

That suddenly struck him as very funny. His chortling became a full-throated laugh. To his surprise, when he looked up, he found The Magician was laughing too.

Their shared mirth added to the hilarity. The Fat Man began shouting with laughter, his large frame shaking. From the corner of his eye, he noticed people at other tables shooting them puzzled and annoyed glances.

He managed to regain some control, though his chuckling continued. The Magician was still smiling as well. In on the joke. Just the two of them. Maybe the guy wasn't so bad, for a queer.

"Do you want to hear my theory?" said The Magician. "I think it was that new drug I've read about. LSD, I believe it's called."

The Fat Man raised a finger and shook it in reproof.

"Don't get too smart for your own good there, Mandrake."

"Fascinating really," said The Magician. "You can buy it on the street these days, if you're so inclined. Quite a volatile compound. Virtually undetectable. A small dose will make you see pretty rainbows and flowers for a few hours. But a larger dose? Enough to drive a man permanently insane."

The Fat Man looked at the stage again. The blonde was still singing. But now she was looking right at him. Reading his thoughts. He looked away. There in the crowd, Dalton glared at him. No! Not Dalton. The coon waiter. Jesus.

Then he looked back across the table to find The Magician smiling at him. A safe harbor in the crowded room.

"I have another theory," The Magician said, his voice sounding distant and tinny. "This campaign of yours. This is ... shall we say ... a personal project, isn't it? Your employers don't even

know about me. Am I right?"

The Fat Man looked at his fedora on the table. Was it his? He couldn't quite remember.

"Sometimes a man has to do what needs to be done," The Fat Man said.

The Magician steepled his fingers.

"As I suspected."

The Fat Man looked at the singer again, then back at The Magician.

"I need to know," The Fat Man said. "How'd you do it?"

"How did I do it?"

"The card. Under the napkin."

The Magician extracted another cigarette from his jacket and lit it.

"It's really quite simple," he said. "The charming lady from the audience only thought she picked that card. Actually, I manipulated it into her hand. Then I concealed her card up my sleeve. Our waiter placed a duplicate under her napkin as he made his rounds. He's an associate of mine. Quite adept at secreting things where they need to go."

"So that's how it's done," The Fat Man said. "Aren't you afraid I'll tell someone your secret?"

The Magician smiled once more.

"Somehow, I doubt you will."

With that, The Magician stood and strode off into the crowd. The Fat Man watched him go. He needed to address a matter with The Magician, but at the moment he couldn't remember what it was. And so he leaned back in his chair, watching the cigarette smoke in the air swirl in patterns of profound and unknowable complexity.

