

## Magic with Thirteen-Year-Old Boys

by Robert Reed

*Magic takes many forms. In recent years, we've seen "White Magic," "Black Magic for Dummies," and "Magic for Beginners." Now Mr. Reed contributes his own tale of supernatural arts with this inquiry into some of the shadowy recesses of human sexuality. Despite the title of this tale, parents might want to vet this one before sharing it with youngsters.*

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They do love to talk. There always has to be conversation before, and afterward, unless they're deeply drunk, words are pretty much mandatory. Nothing makes women happier than hours of empty, soul-baring chatter. There's even a few of them that need to talk while they're doing it. Of course their words get awfully simple, if it's during. They grunt out commands and sometimes encouragement, and a few favorite phrases are repeated with predictable rhythm. But if a man can hold his cadence, and if he knows what she likes, it isn't boring. Simple and busy and very crude noise wrapped around a fair amount of pleasure, or maybe a huge amount of pleasure. Then it's finished, preferably for him and for her both, and everyone gets a few moments of silence marked with wet breathing and spiritual insights.

\* \* \* \*

"Ted?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you awake?"

"No, I'm not."

"No?"

"Hey—!"

"Are you awake now, Ted?"

"That fingernail—!"

Without a trace of sorrow in her voice, she says, "Sorry." Then after a deep sigh, she asks, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

"Liar."

"Okay. You caught me."

"So what's on your mind?"

“You.”

“Good answer.”

Good enough to earn a few moments of uninterrupted quiet.

“Ted?”

“Who?”

She ignores his response. “I have a question,” she announces. “I’ve been meaning to ask this since, I don’t know when. A couple weeks, at least....”

“What’s the question?”

“Do you believe?”

“In what?”

“Anything at all,” she says.

He says, “Gravity,” and laughs for a moment. “I wholeheartedly believe in the abiding force of gravity.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she warns. “I’m talking about faith. In God and that sort of stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Stuff.”

“Do you accept things you can’t see? Forces and powers that exist outside the realm of pure reason?”

“Gravity,” he repeats.

“Don’t joke, Ted.”

“I mean that.” He sounds sincere and perhaps a little angry. “Most of human history has been lived happily without the concept of gravity. People never imagined that bodies in space attract each other. Even with Newton’s equations ... they work only in limited situations. And the deepest parts of Einstein’s work still don’t address every condition in our universe, much less in those other realms that may or may not exist.”

A hand waves in the darkness. “Fine. Gravity.”

“Here’s something else to consider,” he says. “We can’t tell for certain that every mass in the universe attracts every other mass. It’s impossible to do the necessary research. I mean, yes, the Earth pulls down on us. And two metal balls

suspended on delicate wires will attract one another in the proper way. But what about two naked people sprawled out on sweaty sheets? That work has never been done in the laboratory. Who knows if the law of nature holds in our circumstances?" He laughs again, briefly. "So really, you can see, this business about gravity is one enormous leap of faith."

She says, "Sorry."

"Apology accepted."

A pause. "Anything else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is there anything else you have faith in?"

"Oh, sure."

"Are you going to say, 'Evolution'?"

"Hardly," he says. "Natural selection has been proven more thoroughly and far more convincingly than gravity has ever been."

"Okay. What about magic in general?"

"What about it?"

"Do you believe in it?"

"In magic?"

"Do you understand the question?"

He sighs.

"You can't accept magic," she decides.

"Think not?"

"Judging by your tone—"

"You can't read my tone, and I'd bet anything you can't read my mind. Little Miss Believes-in-things-that-can't-be-seen."

"Sorry."

He takes a long moment, then asks, "What do you mean by 'magic'?"

"Anything and everything that's miraculous," she begins, with feeling. "Magic is everything that shouldn't happen. Magic can conjure up the most amazing things, and usually from nothing."

“From nothing,” he repeats.

“Magic has rituals and rules. And when it has real power, magic can harm the weak and the sloppy. But there always must be a few great wizards in our world, and with their spells, they achieve wonders. That’s why magic exists. That’s why it is something worth treasuring.”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I said, ‘Yes.’”

“You buy the idea of magic and spells?”

“Very much so.”

“All right. What kinds of magic?”

After a moment, he says, “No.”

“What?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“You will too.”

“Why? You want to hear about my little run-in with the mystical world?”

“Of course.”

“Okay then. I was thirteen.”

She says nothing.

“Thirteen,” he repeats.

“You were a boy. I heard you.”

He takes a breath and then another breath before saying, “You don’t know anything about being a thirteen-year-old boy. Understand?”

“Okay,” she squeaks.

He takes one final deep breath. “I was with my best friends,” he says, “and one day, seemingly by accident, we happened across a magical book.”

\* \* \* \*

They were playing in a woodlot behind their subdivision. Ted had seen a fox the night before—a beautiful graceful dream of an animal—and with the help of his two closest friends, he was searching for the fox’s den. What the boys would do when they found it, he had no idea. But the hunt managed to hold everybody’s

interest for nearly an hour, leaving the three of them hot and thirsty, and ready for some new adventure.

That's when Phillip found a backpack tucked under a juniper tree.

Scott didn't approve. "You should have left it there," was his opinion. "It doesn't belong to you, so put it back now."

Phillip was the brave one in their group. Scott believed in rules and obedience, while Ted was somewhere between. Exactly where he fit depended on the day and his mood.

"Don't you want to see what's inside?" Phillip asked. Then he shook the pack, something with heft bouncing inside.

"No," Scott said. "That isn't ours—"

"But maybe there's an ID," Ted mentioned. "We'll find the owner and give it back, and maybe even split the reward."

The rationale meant something to Scott. Sensing something fun, Phillip didn't want any owner to be found, but it served his needs to nod confidently, saying, "Yeah, let's look for a driver's license or something."

The pack was old, the gray-green nylon fabric thin as tissue in places, a couple tears mended with rusted safety pins. The object was dirty enough to show that it had been outside for a few days, but not as filthy as it would have been if it were exposed to last week's heavy rains. The back pocket had been left open, Phillip discovered. It was empty. The zipper to the main pocket fought his tugging, but he managed to pull it open far enough to look inside, turning the pack to where it could fill with sunshine.

Many years later, Ted would still remember his friend's face changing. The blue eyes just lit up, and a mouth that was usually held in a tight smirk fell open. Then a small, deeply impressed voice said, "Not here."

"What is it?" Scott asked.

Phillip clamped both hands over the open pack, sealing in the contents. "Back this way," he said. "In the gully."

Better than anyone else in the world, those three boys knew the local terrain. It took several minutes, but once they stopped running, they were out of sight of every human eye in Creation, squatting on a flat piece of the ravine floor, forming a triangle around this most unexpected treasure.

"Okay," Phillip said, releasing his hands.

"What is it?" Scott inquired, leaning back warily.

“Take a look,” Phillip said to Ted.

Whatever was inside, Ted guessed that it wasn’t dangerous. At least it wouldn’t bite or explode. So he reached in blindly, feeling a stack of thick paper bound together with fat rubber bands. Then just for fun, he faked pain, jumping back as if a set of fangs had stabbed his fingers.

“Oh, crap!” Scott blurted, tumbling onto his butt.

Ted laughed at his cowardly friend, and then he pulled out a stack of photographs. Suddenly every boy was staring at the top image. Even Phillip, who knew what to expect, was staring. Everybody took a small step back, and Ted dropped the discovery on the dusty ground. And all these years later, he could still see the contorted face of the young woman and an astonishing amount of her naked body and what the faceless man was obviously doing to her.

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“Porn,” she says.

He doesn’t respond.

“I thought you were talking about magic,” she complains. “Not just some dirty pictures.”

“I told you,” he says. “I was thirteen.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“A new-born adolescent.”

She decides not to speak.

“You won’t understand,” he says. “You can’t. Even if I was to tell you the whole story—”

“I thought you just did.”

“No. That’s just the beginning. I was setting the scene. The important stuff comes later.”

“Is that a pun?”

“Do you want to hear this, or not? Because I don’t have to tell it.”

“I’m listening,” she promises. “Go on.”

But he doesn’t say one word. Not immediately. He seems to be debating the relative merits of what he has begun, and when he finally does speak, he does so slowly, cautiously, as if at any moment, given the tiniest excuse, he will stop talking and never again say one word about this intimate subject.

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The boys quickly recovered from their shock. Phillip knelt and studied the top image. Then he wiped both hands against his sweaty shirt, and with the others close beside him, he touched the page. The photograph had been glued to a sheet of what looked like thin cardboard, stiff and pale gray, larger than the picture and cut to size with long scissors. Two fat red rubber bands held the book together. Phillip removed the top band and then its partner, taking the trouble to place both inside the empty pack. Then he paused and grinned, enjoying a quick deep breath before turning the page.

The next photograph was smaller, and it was black-and-white, and it was nearly as memorable as the first. A different girl was holding herself in a completely different position. What must have been a brilliant flash gave her body a silvery-white glow that was at least as captivating as what she was doing. The man seemed to be the same man, judging by the proportions of his body. But the bed was different, and the room around the bed too, and if it was the same camera as before, it was being used in a very different fashion.

The third page had four color Polaroid pictures set in a specific order, each equally faded by time. This time, there was no man. But again, the girl was fresh. She looked young and exceptionally tall, but like the first two women, she seemed to be wholly oblivious to a camera, busily doing things with herself that were as bizarre as they were captivating.

In all, there were thirty pages.

The boys counted the photographs and arrived at several general conclusions: Each page held a different girl, and when a man was visible, he was probably the same man, or at least a fellow with a similar body. But the girls were never the same. Not in age or build, and sometimes not even in their race. The only similarity was that each of them was young, and in some fashion, lovely.

About their lover, nothing seemed exceptional. Even boys of thirteen had enough experience in the world to feel sure about that. The man's legs were not lean or particularly muscular, nor was any dimension about his body anything but average. Whenever he was standing, his stomach looked pudgy. Perhaps he had handsome features, but there was no way to tell since his face was out of view. But the women's faces were always visible; with each astonishing image, it was the face that the boys' eyes were drawn to first.

Among the three of them, Phillip had the most experience with pornography. His older brother had amassed a considerable library of *Playboys* and *Penthouses* and even a few *Hustlers*. And most important, Phillip had a practical smartness about things most thirteen-year-olds never even thought about.

"This doesn't make sense," he complained.

Scott was flipping back through the book now, slowly, page by delicious page. "What do you...?" His voice faded, hands adjusting the fit of his jeans. "What

doesn't make sense?"

"Each one's different," Phillip said.

Ted was staring at the faces and breasts and other stretches of honest, captivating anatomy, committing details to a memory that would never again function at this very high level.

"He's got to be some kind of stud," Scott replied, aching with envy. "Whoever he is, the guy knows how to get girls."

"I don't mean the different girls," Phillip said. "I mean the cameras."

Confused, the other boys glanced at their friend.

"We can check again. But I don't think it's ever the same camera twice," Phillip continued. "Just like it's not the same girl. And does that make sense?"

Ted hadn't considered the matter, not even for half an instant.

"Thirty cameras. Who owns thirty cameras?" Phillip flipped back up the Polaroid page. "You're a stud, okay. And you like taking pictures. But who in the hell uses a new camera each time?"

"He's rich," Scott offered. "Which explains how he gets them, too."

Phillip shook his head. "Okay, he's loaded. But why would a rich dude bother with a freakin' Polaroid?"

Ted began to appreciate the problem, although he couldn't imagine that it meant much. What mattered were the photographs themselves. "Who do you think they belong to?" he asked, trying to steer the topic.

"And why put the book out here?" Phillip pressed. "This is an adult. He's got a house of his own, somewhere. Why stick this kind of thing in an old backpack and dump it in the middle of the woods?"

Ted had wondered about that problem, at least in passing.

But in one critical issue, Scott was miles ahead of his friends. "I don't care how many cameras were used," he announced, "or why this was lost out here. This book belongs to us now. That's what matters." The cowardly, law-abiding boy had finally found something worth taking. Turning back to the first picture, he said, "What we need to do, right now ... we've got to figure out what we're doing with this wonderful gift."

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He pauses again.

After a long silence, she says, "I bet they were different men, each with his



own camera. That would explain things.”

Watching her, he says nothing.

Then she nods, admitting, “But that’s a smart thing to notice. Perceptive and all. Your friend, Phillip, must have been a pretty sharp kid. I don’t know if I’d pick up on it, if I was looking at dirty pictures.”

“You never have?” he asks.

“Not like guys look, no.”

“Yeah, I guess not. Women don’t like porn the same as men do.”

“Tell me.”

“We’re wired differently,” he says. “Visual stimulation is everything. Sometimes I think we’re the same species only because we’ve got to interbreed. If not for that, men and women would just fly apart.”

“That’s a pretty harsh assessment.”

“And honest,” he says.

She shrugs, returning to her explanation. “This was back when? The early eighties, I’m guessing. Even before the Internet, there were plenty of twisted men collecting twisted smut. There were networks where they could sell it and trade for it. Some guy with an obsession probably just gathered up a stack of dirty pictures where the men looked kind of the same.”

“That’s one explanation.”

“You have a better one?”

“A simpler, sharper explanation. Yes.”

“And what’s that?”

“Those cameras are different because each girl supplied the equipment. A variety of cameras and film, in a string of bedrooms and wherever.”

“Then that was one incredibly smooth gentleman.”

He says nothing.

“Hey, honey. Pop a roll in your thirty-five-millimeter and set the timer. Let’s make a memento of tonight.”

“Doesn’t sound reasonable to you?”

“Hardly,” she says. “And I know a little something about taking pictures, too. If these shots were half as good as you keep saying ... well, that means each woman

took dozens, maybe hundreds of them. Because in my experience, even the best photographer needs luck when he's using timers or a cord tied to the switch—"

"Magic."

"What?"

"Do you remember? That's how we got on this subject, talking about spells and magic."

"Yeah, I remember—"

"'Conjuring up amazing things from nothing.' You said words like that, didn't you?"

"Pornography is magic. Is that what you're telling me?"

"With rituals and rules, and a real power. Plus the capacity to do enormous harm, if that power's left in the wrong hands."

"This is just stupid."

He says nothing.

"Stupid," she repeats. Then with a grudging curiosity, she asks, "So. Is there anything else to this dumb story?"

"You tell me: What else does magic involve?"

"Involve?"

"What haven't you seen so far?"

She hesitates. Then, warily, she says, "The wizard?"

And with that, he resumes his story.

\* \* \* \*

Together, the boys found a fresh hiding place for their treasure. In another portion of the woods was a discarded slab of old pavement, invisible from most vantage points but offering a clear view of the surrounding terrain. An earlier generation of boys had dug a deep dry hole beneath the slab. Rain would never touch the pack. Brush and last year's leaves hid its presence. With the conviction of grown men, they drew up rules concerning the book: You had to sit above the hole for five minutes, making sure nobody had followed you. The book and bag had to stay in that one place. Each picture was to be handled carefully. And when you were done, you needed to make sure you were alone before hiding everything inside the same hole.

For a week, that system worked well enough.

Ted visited the book four or five times. Phillip went with him on the first visit, and they discovered Scott already there, sitting on the edge of the slab, long legs dangling in the speckled light. The next day, Ted went alone—his longest, most memorable visit—investing at least an hour examining one image after the next. Then there was another day when he hoped to be alone, but Scott caught him on the trail. His friend was a big kid, clumsy and pale, smart at school and foolish everywhere else. “Have you already been there?” Scott asked, almost running to catch up.

“You know I was,” Ted replied. “You saw me—”

“I mean today,” the boy added.

It wasn’t even noon. “No,” Ted admitted. Then a premonition tickled him, and he asked, “How about you?”

“Once,” he admitted.

“You mean today?”

“After breakfast,” Scott said, his face coloring and eyes growing distant.

There was an addictive quality to those photographs. Even at thirteen, Ted found the effects both sickening and irresistible—a set of innate urges released by what was nothing more than chemical emulsions on sheets of fancy paper. He couldn’t stop thinking about the girls and young women. Without trying, he would close his eyes and see not only their bodies but their faces, too, and in particular, their vivid eyes and pretty mouths that helped convey a set of expressions that were both remote and self-absorbed, and to him, endlessly fascinating.

All women, in all possible circumstances, suddenly held potentials that Ted had never noticed. Actresses were more beautiful than ever, even the famous old ones. And the neighborhood women—the average wives and mothers who before this were no more than little portions of a humdrum landscape—had become miraculous creatures. The boy found himself staring at them, asking himself what kinds of wondrous, unlikely things these ordinary ladies did with their husbands. And worst of all were the teenage girls. A week earlier, Ted could have made inane conversation with most of them, feeling only a pleasant nervousness. But now the stakes were infinitely greater. He had trouble making eye contact, much less offering any coherent noise; and his worst enemy was his own infected brain, constantly inventing ways to think about matters delicious and wrong.

Phillip seemed less infected than Ted. Maybe his earlier exposure to dirty magazines acted like a vaccination, or perhaps it was just his natural man-of-the-world attitude. Whatever the reason, Phillip didn’t feel compelled to visit the backpack every day, and when he pulled out the pictures, he noticed nonsexual details missed by his best friends.

“This is the oldest photograph,” he told them.

The image was black-and-white, but that didn't mean anything. Plenty of the pictures were black-and-white. Ted took hold of the photo and lifted it up to the light. The quality was obvious. Family portraits had the same perfect flash and glossy finish. "But why's this the oldest?"

"Look here." A crooked finger jabbed at the edge of the photograph. "See the calendar?"

In the background, something was hanging on the white wall.

"You look at it." His friend produced a magnifying glass, pressing it into Ted's hand. "Try and read the month and year."

May 1938.

"Let me see," Scott said. But instead of reading the date, he used the glass to study the fine details of the woman's body.

"So there's an old calendar on the wall," Ted responded.

"What about these hair styles?" Phillip flipped between examples. "This one looks like it's from the forties, and this has to be today, and this one back here ... it sure looks like what's-her-name's hair. From the beach movies."

He meant Sandra Dee or Gidget. One of those girl-next-door girls.

"There's thirty years of pictures here," Phillip said.

The idea was unsettling, sure. But Ted pretended not to care. "The guy has been busy," he argued. "That's all that means."

Flipping back to the oldest photograph, Phillip pointed out, "This belly here ... it doesn't look like a twenty-year-old belly."

"That's a different guy," Ted offered. "An earlier pervert."

"Except it isn't." Phillip had invested a great deal of time to the study, measuring the male's legs and belly, and everything else that was visible. Pointing to a kidney-shaped blotch riding on one pasty white leg, he then flipped to another black-and-white shot. "This is probably the newest photograph," he continued. "See? The same exact mark. And the body looks exactly the same as before."

Ted didn't like looking at the man's bare leg.

Scott claimed the new photograph, and again, he used the magnifying glass on the woman.

Without question, Scott was sicker than his buddies. Three or four times every day, he devised some excuse to slip out of his house and down to the woods for just one more look. He had admitted that he couldn't sleep through the night

anymore, and that he was rubbing himself raw. There were moments when the kid seemed to be willing himself to dive inside one of those inviting, addictive images.

“Look at this,” said Scott. “Look at her close.”

He set the new picture and magnifying glass into Ted’s hands.

As it happened, this was Ted’s favorite image. The clear, colorless photograph showed what the man was doing, and judging by the woman’s arching back, she was enjoying herself. Enthralled, she had twisted her head around as far as possible, looking up at the camera, her long straight hair plunging away from her face, leaving her features more than half visible—a woman filled with a mixture of determined concentration and utter bliss.

Ted’s breathing quickened whenever he saw her.

“Look close,” Scott repeated.

With the glass, Ted started to count the neat knobby bumps that defined that wondrous spine.

“No, her face. That’s what you need to see.”

But he already had. A hundred times, at least. It was a long elegant face carrying a joyful, almost religious pleasure that he only hoped he could give to his future wife, at least once in her life.

“You’re not seeing it,” Scott complained.

Phillip had to ask, “What are we supposed to see?”

“This woman,” Scott blurted. “She lives on our street, Ted.”

Oh, crap.

“She’s that blond lady with twins. Remember? She and her husband moved in last winter, while she was still pregnant...”

\* \* \* \*

“Was it?”

“Was it what?”

“Her. That mom with twins.”

He says, “I hadn’t realized it until then. But it sure looked like her, yeah.”

“Well, I guess that’s not too surprising,” she decides. “Since whoever took those pictures probably lived somewhere close.”

“Not surprising at all,” he agrees.

“But you know what does surprise me, hearing this?”

“I think I can make a good guess.”

“The years.”

He makes a neutral sound.

“They don’t add up right.”

He says nothing.

A long, thoughtful pause ends with the declaration, “That’ll have to wait, I guess.” Then she says, “Go on and tell me: What happened next?”

\* \* \* \*

The boys started keeping watch over the neighbor’s house. Ted particularly kept tabs on it. The ordinary split-level stood across the street, two lots removed from Ted’s bedroom window. With binoculars, he could see the front yard and part of the back. In those first four mornings, the young husband emerged before seven-thirty. He was a tall man, far too skinny to be the fellow in the pictures. He would happily kiss his babies good-bye and hug his adulterous wife before driving off to the city. Then around nine or nine-thirty, the young woman would put the babies into her car and run a few errands, returning before noon with a trunk full of shopping sacks. It was that second morning, not long after she had vanished, that Ted went outside with a half-inflated football. He kicked it down the street and back again, and then he kicked it hard enough to drop it into her front yard. Then he pretended to shank the punt, placing the ball into the woman’s fenced backyard. Nobody was home; what did it matter? He walked through the gate to recover what was his, and then slowly circled the rest of the house, peering into every window until he felt certain that the shag carpet in the finished basement was the same as the carpet visible in the photograph.

The babies took naps after lunch, it seemed. That’s when the woman would step alone into the backyard, wearing a single-piece swimsuit and white paste on her pretty little nose. In the binoculars, she looked to be in her twenties, with tall legs and a little thickness around her waist. Her hair was long and straw-colored, and it couldn’t have been any straighter. For an hour or two, she would sit on a chaise lounge, not really sunbathing but enjoying her quiet time with magazines and little naps. Then she would step back inside, not appearing again until around six o’clock when her husband came home again.

Except on the fourth day, things were different.

Ted was sitting next to his window. It was after lunch when he saw Scott emerge from his house and pause in front of the woman’s house, shamelessly staring at the curtains. Then he strolled past Ted, glancing up with a possessed grin before heading for the woods and the backpack. A few minutes later, Phillip rode past on

his bike, heading in the same direction. The woman still hadn't appeared, and Ted began to suspect that she wouldn't. Maybe one of her babies couldn't sleep. Whatever the reason, he felt a strong urge to follow his friends; but then a pedestrian appeared down the block—a man of no particular description who was wearing nothing of note, walking up the slight slope and then pausing to glance both ways before crossing the street, never breaking stride, calmly walking along the driveway and up the concrete steps that led to the woman's front door.

The door opened and closed, seemingly of its own volition.

The man had vanished.

For as long as he could stand it, Ted waited. But his patience and strength only carried him for a few minutes. He picked up the football and stepped outside, flinging it down the street and running after it, then picking the ball up again, trying hard to kick it exactly the same way as he did before.

The football spiraled into the wrong backyard.

Ted ignored his mistake. He lifted the latch of the woman's gate, stepped through and carefully set it down again. The finished basement was at the back of the house, on the ground floor. Two days ago, the curtains had been pulled wide open, letting him stare through the sliding glass doors. But now they were pulled shut—heavy gray curtains bleached by sunshine—and for another minute or two, the boy stood on the concrete patio, trying to will the curtains to part, flooding the room with honest light.

He thought about running away.

Then came the sensation of being watched, and Ted turned slowly, looking at the adjacent houses. Had any neighbors seen him? What kind of trouble was he going to be in now?

He didn't care, he realized.

Suddenly his hand reached out. As if watching someone else's fingers, he saw them grab hold of the warm steel handle of the door, and with a firm push, the unlocked door moved slightly. The stiff curtain bent toward him in response, cold air playing across his bare forearm. He took a moment to gather himself. Then his hand reached around the curtain, and he crept close and took a deep breath and held it, and tried to get so close that when he pulled the curtain aside, no sunlight would shine indoors. He would have his own little window on whatever was happening, and Ted was so sure of his plan that he didn't notice the touch of two fingers on the back of his hand. He was standing against the curtain and the fingers touched him and then pulled away, and he noticed their absence instead. Then he leaped back and watched in horror as a thick hairy hand—a hand almost as familiar as his own—pushed between the curtain and jamb, pulling the door shut again, and this time locking it with a clear, sharp thunk.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh, God.”

He doesn't reply.

“Go on. Sorry to interrupt. Go on.”

\* \* \* \*

Ted found his friends sitting on the slab of old concrete, huddled around their treasure. Scott had found the time to purchase his own magnifying glass—a bigger, better model. Phillip was using his glass to study another picture. No, that wasn't what he was doing exactly. As Ted approached, he realized the boy had turned a picture over, and he was staring intently at the stiff gray backing.

“What are you doing?” Ted asked.

Then before anybody could answer, he added, “I just saw our guy. I'm sure it's him. He's with the blond right now, doing her.”

Both boys looked up at him, visibly impressed.

“Did you get to see them doing it?” Scott asked.

“Nearly,” was Ted's reply.

Scott groaned as if in pain, and he immediately started hunting for her photograph.

Phillip had a clearer understanding of these matters. Waving his magnifying glass, he asked, “So you didn't see anything?”

“Not really.”

“But he's there now?”

“He was. Ten minutes ago.”

Phillip tried to talk. “Maybe we should—” he managed to say. But then he interrupted himself, asking Ted, “Did you see our guy's face?”

“Sort of.”

Scott turned paler than ever, and he lifted his arm, pointing when he gasped, “Is that him?”

The man was standing fifty feet behind Ted. By all appearances, he was unremarkable—a smallish fellow of no particular age, with a modest gut and shaggy dark hair. His clothes weren't rich or special. His features would never be called handsome, and they were very nearly forgettable. But his eyes were hot and black and very small, and he managed to project an intensity that earned a frightened silence from his audience.



“I want them back,” the stranger said slowly, firmly.

Scott pulled the photographs into his lap.

That made the man smile. He stepped closer, and even more quietly, he said, “They belong to me.”

“So what the hell are they?” Phillip asked. Then he answered his own question, admitting, “They’re not like any porn I’ve seen. And this stuff they’re glued to—”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been looking. Close.” Phillip stood up—a small boy brandishing his magnifying glass as if it could serve as a weapon. “That backing of theirs. To me, it looks like dried skin.”

Ted felt weak and cold.

The man gave an appreciative nod.

“Human skin, is it?”

“I’ll tell you,” the man said. “If you give all of those pictures back to me now. I’ll tell.”

Phillip made up his mind. In a moment, he snatched everything out of Scott’s grasp, shoving them into the backpack and tossing the pack underhand.

The man caught the pack without letting those fiery eyes leave Phillip’s face. Then he explained, “Human skin does work and works very well, but there are substitutes. Easier to find, and a lot easier to use.”

“Use for what?” Ted muttered.

“Well,” said the man, “to make a very strong soup.”

“What do you want with soup?” Scott blurted out skeptically.

“I rather like to eat it.” Then he pulled a photograph from the pack—the blond woman on her hands and knees, as it happened—and he said a few odd words before placing the corner of the photo’s backing into his own mouth, biting off a piece of the skin and swallowing it whole.

The boys glanced at one another.

Grinning, the man began to turn away.

“Leave the pictures,” Scott begged. “Just a little while longer, please....”

The ageless wizard began to laugh. Quietly, he laughed at Scott and at all of

them. “But what would be the point?” he inquired. “The flesh is as seasoned as you can make it, my boys. My soup can’t be any richer. My good boys. My dear little men.”

\* \* \* \*

Silence.

Then she asks, “Is that it?”

“Pretty much,” he concedes.

“The pervert ... the wizard ... what did he do next?”

“Just walked off and vanished.”

“And did you ever see him again?”

“No.”

She thinks for a long while. Then with a sigh, she says, “What year was that?”

“1970. In the summer.”

“Thirty-seven years ago.”

“Sure.”

“And you should be in your fifties now.”

He says nothing.

“If this is true,” she says, and then she pulls back. “I don’t know, Ted...”

“What don’t you know?”

“If I can believe any of this.”

“Nobody is making you,” he says. But then he points out, “You’re the one who openly and fervently believes in magic.”

“You didn’t find the wizard again?”

“I said I didn’t. No.”

“But that kind of magic ... with the skins backing the pictures, and those words that he said ... did you find out how to do the trick...?”

In a certain way, he says nothing.

“Ted?”

Nothing.

“Ted?”

“What?”

“I have a camera.”