DARK ROOMS

by Lisa Goldstein

Lisa Goldstein offers us a poignant look at the magic of Georges Méliés, one of science fiction’s first filmmakers. The story was inspired by “a photograph of an elderly Méliés selling toys in a train station. As soon as I saw the image, I knew there was a story in it.”

* * * *

Nathan Stevens first saw Georges Méliés in 1896, in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris. There, in the Salon des Indiens, the Lumiére brothers had opened the first moving picture theatre, and Stevens watched, entranced, as a train arrived at a station, a man watered his garden, a blacksmith worked at his forge.

The pictures ended and the lights came up. The glow from the gaslamps was not harsh, but he sat there blinking, dazzled, his eyes filled with motion, with smoke and waves and wind-blown leaves. For a moment he wondered that his surroundings remained the same, that the train did not roar through the small room, flattening chairs as it went, or the sea crash through the walls and drown them all.

Near him people were picking up their purses and canes, putting on their coats, stepping over his legs as they headed for the door. Finally the theatre, so crowded a few moments ago, was nearly empty.

One other man had not moved. He was balding, with a drooping mustache and a trim goatee. He was blinking as Stevens himself had done, as if he were just waking from a dream, or loosed from some enchantment.

Then he smiled, perhaps at Stevens, perhaps at a lingering memory from the pictures they had seen together. It was a kind smile, Stevens thought; you might see an uncle smile just that way as he gave a present to his favorite niece. But there was something else in it too, something deeper and more serious, and Stevens thought the man might know more about these films, perhaps even know how they were made.

The man stood. “One minute, please,” Stevens said.

The other man turned, a polite expression on his face. Suddenly Stevens could think of nothing to say, though he had been in Paris for six months and his French was nearly fluent. “A—an amazing thing, isn’t it?” he said finally.

“We will all be changed,” the man said, or Stevens thought he said. He put on his hat.

“Wait,” Stevens said. “Do you know about these—these pictures? Do you know how it’s done?”

The man headed for the aisle. Perhaps he hadn’t heard. Stevens hurried after him, but the man had reached the stairs and was climbing them quickly. Stevens followed and came out into the street. It was still daylight, a stronger light than that of the gaslamps, and he blinked again, bewildered, feeling as if he had surfaced by stages from strange depths.

People walked past him or headed into the café, called out to each other or shouted for cabs. Coaches drove by, their wheels creaking, the horses’ hooves clattering against the street. The new automobiles sped past, smelling of hot metal and burning rubber and factory smoke, their horns blatting.

A man of the same height and build as the one Stevens had seen walked away down the Boulevard des Capucines, adjusting his hat. Stevens ran after him, reached him, tapped him on the shoulder. The other man turned, but instead of the pleasant smile he expected Stevens saw a fierce scowl. For a moment, still tangled within the enchantment of the moving pictures, Stevens thought the man had performed a magic trick, had shaved off his beard and mustache and changed his soft brown eyes to an icy blue.

“Yes?” the man said. “What do you want?”

Stevens walked away, feeling foolish. It was March, but the air still held the chill of winter. He drew his coat closer around him and walked on.

He was twenty years old, and had come to Paris to be an artist. He’d grown up in a small town on Lake Michigan; his father was a fisherman, and his grandfather had been a fisherman before him, and Stevens’s own fate and future had seemed set—and would have been, if not for a maiden aunt who had taken an interest in him. In their town she was said to be artistic, said with pity and disapproval, in the same way people talked about the town madwoman. She had seen promise in him and encouraged him to escape to Paris; she had even given him some money she had from a small inheritance.

He had arrived in Paris a half a year ago. He’d rented a studio and painted every day while the light held, working hard; his aunt’s money would give him only a year in Paris, a year and a half if he was careful. He began to meet other artists, and went to cafés with them in the evenings.

Then one day some friends took him to a studio he had never visited before. The paintings there were a revelation, not so much for their technique, though that was very good, but for the way the artist saw the world, the way he was able to take ordinary things and make them seem new, astonishing, as though no one had ever truly seen them before.

Stevens felt inspired at first, and worked harder than ever. But now all his paintings seemed lifeless, ordinary, compared to this other man’s; they lacked something, though he didn’t know what it was. He was good, he knew that, but perhaps he was not good enough.

Sometimes, when his work was going well, he thought he might be wrong, that he was brilliant, every bit the artist his aunt had seen. Sometimes, though, he would come up against his limitations, and then he would feel resentful. Why had someone else been given this talent and not him? He worked just as hard, he wanted it just as much. He could have painted that dancer, that lake, if only ... well, if only he’d thought of it.

The day faded into evening. He stopped at a restaurant for dinner and then, feeling restless, he wandered the streets, his mind still busy with the train, the forge, the garden. One of the films had shown a parent feeding a child, infusing even that simple act with magic.

As if the world around him was echoing his thoughts he saw the word “magic” shining out into the street, lit by the new electricity. He came closer and saw that it was part of a sign: “Théatre Robert-Houdin—Magic Conjured Within.” An old woman sat in a box outside, separated from him by elaborate wrought-iron bars, and so befuddled was he by the day’s events that at first he thought she was a magic trick herself, that any moment she would disappear or turn to smoke.

“One franc,” she said, holding out her palm. He paid and went inside.

The theatre was dim, lit only by gaslamps turned down low. From somewhere a piano played. At first he could barely make out his surroundings; then rows of chairs swam out of the darkness. He found an empty seat on the aisle and sat down.

A man stood on the stage with his back to the audience. He wore black formal clothing; the tails of his coat reached nearly to his knees. A woman in a shockingly small skirt stepped out from the wings. The man ushered her into a box and closed a door that covered her from the neck down, so that only her face was visible. He made a few passes with his hands and the woman's head floated out onto the stage, her eyes blinking, her mouth moving in a smile.

The head started back to the box, flew past it, returned and missed it again. It swung back and forth across the stage in panic, trying in vain to rejoin its body, and the audience, too, seemed to panic, a few even crying out in alarm.

The magician made another pass. The head went toward the box again and this time managed to glide smoothly inside. At first, horribly, it faced away from the audience; then it turned around and the woman smiled.

The magician opened the box and the woman stepped out, whole and safe. He turned toward the audience and held her hand, and they bowed and straightened. It was only then that Stevens recognized him; it was the man he had followed from the Grand Café.

Stevens sat through the rest of the show impatiently, barely seeing any of the other tricks. At the end he headed up toward the stage, pushing past the crowds of people going the other way. A door stood open at the side of the stage, behind the piano, and he went inside.

He found himself in a dim hallway, filled with objects he could barely make out in the gloom. He stepped carefully past wooden flats shaped like waves, crescent moons, stars, an Egyptian sarcophagus; past a man made of gears and wires. Ropes on pulleys draped down from the ceiling; three or four together tangled him like a spider's web and he pushed them out of the way.

He turned a corner. Something came toward him, a monstrous head swollen like a balloon, wobbling on a string-like neck. He stopped, his heart pounding high and fast in his chest, and then realized that it was his own head, distorted in a mirror.

Now he noticed a door open at the end of the corridor, heard voices, laughter. He peered inside and saw the man, the magician, along with his assistant and the cashier. The assistant had stripped down to her petticoat and was changing into her street clothes. The cashier spat on a cloth and rubbed off the man's makeup.

Stevens went inside. The man looked up. He was younger than

Stevens had first thought, in his mid-thirties.

“I know you, don’t I?” the man said. He tugged at his mustache, as if it were connected to a lever in his brain that might help with his memory. “Where was it...?”

“This afternoon, in the Salon des Indiens,” Stevens said. “Where they showed those pictures—”

“My God, that was you!” the man said. He looked startled, as though their meeting twice in one day exceeded all the laws of probability.

“It’s a funny coincidence, isn’t it?” Stevens said.

“Is it? Do you believe in coincidence?”

“What else could it have been?”

“Any number of things, I suppose. What did you want, at the theatre?”

“To talk about those pictures. I saw the way you looked, after the lights came on. You were—you looked the way I felt. You know how they did it, don’t you?”

“The pictures, yes.” The man smiled, the same smile Stevens had seen at the theatre. “You love them as much as I do, don’t you? I didn’t see that then—I was in a hurry, I had to prepare for my first show here ... But we were supposed to meet, weren’t we? That’s why you found me again. Coincidences are the world’s magic tricks.”

Stevens laughed, catching his enthusiasm. He would believe in coincidences if this man wanted him to; hell, he would believe in unicorns. “I don’t know your name,” he said.

“Georges Méliés.” He bowed; in his formal evening clothes it did not seem at all ridiculous. “And you?”

“Nathan Stevens.”

“Come to my house tomorrow, Nathan Stevens,” Méliés said. “Do you know where Montreuil is?”

Stevens knew only that it was a suburb on the outskirts of Paris. “I’ll find it,” he said.

The magician’s house was larger than Stevens had expected, grander. He knocked at the door and a woman answered, not the one he had seen at the theatre. Without saying anything to him she turned and called out “Georges!”

Méliés met him at the door. “Do you want tea?” he said, leading him inside. “Some pastries? No, what am I saying—you’re not here to talk about trivia. Come on—I’ll show you the camera.”

They went down a hall, past rooms where Stevens glimpsed plush chairs, Persian carpets, mediocre paintings in elaborate frames. He had never been in a house as richly furnished as this one, and for a moment he felt uncomfortable in his old trousers, his ragged collar hidden by a wool scarf. Then Méliés began to talk, and he forgot their differences and listened, fascinated.

“That wasn’t the first time I saw those films,” he said. “I was there the day of the premiere, sitting in the dark, and I could barely believe it when the pictures started to move. And when I came to myself again, my first thought was, This is for me.”

Méliés led him up the stairs. “I offered them ten thousand francs for a camera like theirs,” he said. “The Lumiére brothers. They said they wouldn’t sell it, not at any price. So I found another one, a different kind, but unfortunately it isn’t as good.”

He led Stevens into a room. The room held only a table, with a wooden box standing on top of it.

Stevens went to look at the box. There were gears in front of it, or behind it, and an eyepiece. “So that’s it,” he said. He ran his fingers along the smooth wooden surface, then bent and put his eye to the eyepiece.

“I’m still fiddling with it,” Méliés said. “See, there’s this screw here—it’s supposed to wind the film ahead with every shot, but it’s not working right. And I have to film outside, in the garden, because of the light. I’ve got a place all set up.”

“So the film moves, like—like a kinetoscope,” Stevens said, straightening. “But you don’t have to look into a box for the pictures—you see it up on the wall, the same time as everybody else. It’s—it’s —”

“Projected, yes,” Méliés said. “Come on—I’ll show you the garden.”

“Not yet,” Stevens said. He bent and looked through the eyepiece again.

* * * *

Stevens visited Méliés often after that. They took the camera apart and put it together again, adjusted the screw and worked out where to perforate the Kodak film. Finally, after several false starts, they watched together as a second Stevens, this one formed out of light and shadow, walked across Méliés’s wall, and, at the same time, by some strange alchemy, walked across the garden as well. When it was over they hugged and slapped each other on the back, shouting so loudly that Méliés’s wife Eugénie came upstairs to see what had happened.

They went out celebrating that night. Méliés took him to places he had never seen before, restaurants and theatres at the end of alleys or up a flight of darkened stairs, where men juggled knives and beautiful women ate fire. Every turn seem to take him to new parts of Paris, and in his increasingly befuddled state he wondered if Méliés had conjured them out of thin air.

At one place he and Méliés had just sat at a table when a belligerent-looking man came up and told them they had taken his seat.

“What is it you say?” Méliés said in English.

Stevens laughed. He had never heard Méliés speak English before.

The man turned to him. “What are you laughing about?” he said.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” Stevens said in English. “My friend and I are tourists, from the United States.”

“Get out of my seat,” the man said angrily.

He came closer. Méliés reached into the pocket of the man’s overcoat and took out a frog. “Excuse me,” he said in French, holding the frog in the palm of his hand. “You seem to have a frog in your pocket.”

“Get out of here!” the man said.

The frog croaked. Méliés put it in his pocket and they stood and ran for the door.

They hurried down a few streets, then stopped. Stevens was laughing too hard to breathe. “Poor frog, to have such an owner,” Méliés said. “I’m glad we rescued it, aren’t you?”

“Were you carrying that frog all this time?” Stevens asked.

Méliés turned serious suddenly, a drunkard’s quick transformation. “Do you know, I don’t think I was. And yet—somehow I knew it would be there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think—I think it was magic. True magic. There is true magic, you know. No one understands that better than a man who works illusions.”

“What? No—no, you can’t believe—”

“But I do. And do you know why I was able to work magic, when I never could before?” He put his face close to Stevens’s; there was a thick smell of wine on his breath. “It’s because you’re here. Do you remember that day when we met, and then met again? There’s a bond between us—I felt it when I saw you at my theatre. And you feel it too, don’t you? Apart we’re nothing, but together—”

Stevens nodded slowly. He did feel a bond, but it was because of their mutual love for moving pictures, nothing more. And yet—and yet—he hadn’t seen the frog at the beginning of the evening...

Méliés laughed suddenly. “I’m very drunk,” he said. “I’m drunk, and you don’t believe me. It’s all right—no one ever does. Let’s go home, and we’ll forget all about it.”

* * * *

The day after their celebration it was Stevens’s turn behind the camera, filming while Méliés stood at a table and did card tricks. Stevens had a fierce hangover—they both did—but he found that if he closed one eye and looked through the eyepiece he was able to concentrate.

Two days later Méliés brought the film back from the developer. Stevens dimmed the lights and projected it on the wall, and they watched as Méliés passed his wand over the table, fanned out a deck of cards, pulled a missing card from his suit pocket. Méliés had made those motions yesterday, Stevens thought, and was making them again today, and would continue making them until the end of time, whenever anyone ran this strip of film. He had seen this magic before, of course, but this time it was him doing it; he was the magician, the priest of light and darkness.

The film ended, and Méliés turned on the light, and as he did so something else was illuminated for Stevens. He was not a painter; he had never been one. But this was another kind of art, and he could do this, could create something permanent with film and a camera.

He thought of his artist friends, and suddenly he realized that he'd nearly forgotten them, that he hadn't seen them in weeks. He wanted to tell them about Méliés, about his decision, and that evening he went back to the café.

But to his surprise the artists were scornful, both of Méliés and his art. "My parents know his family," one of them said. "His father's a rich man, a factory owner. And his wife's rich too. You didn't think he made his money on magic shows and moving pictures, did you?"

The others laughed, all except Stevens. He thought of the opulent house in Montreuil, the staid furniture and unexceptional paintings, of how the artists would ridicule them.

"It's only failed artists who use cameras, anyway," someone else said. "People who have no talent. If they could paint on their own they wouldn't need a machine to do it for them."

They were wrong, but Stevens knew he could not make them understand. He had nothing in common with them any longer, he realized, and he finished his drink and left the café.

* * * *

Stevens filmed more of Méliés's magic tricks, and by May they had enough for a moving picture, *Playing Cards*. But they were starting to get bored with the garden, and they took the camera out into the streets, capturing people walking on the pavements, cars and horses driving by, a parade.

One day when Stevens came to visit he found the room already dark, Méliés running the projector. "Look at this," he said. "Do you remember when we were filming at the Opéra a week ago, and the camera jammed? I didn't think to develop it until now, but look what happened."

He ran a strip of film, ordinary enough, an omnibus driving past the Opéra. Then, suddenly, the omnibus turned into a hearse. “This is where it jammed,” Méliés said, unable to contain his delight. “Remember? You fiddled with it and got it working again, but by then it was filming something entirely different. It’s like a magic trick, isn’t it? One thing substituting for another.” He laughed, and Stevens laughed with him, carried away once again by the man’s excitement.

Summer came, and one day Méliés motioned Stevens in front of the camera again. “I want to try something new, an experiment,” Méliés said. “Stand still, just stay there. Don’t move.”

Stevens stood, wondering what tricks the other man had come up with this time, what illusions he had up his sleeve. But he felt foolish too, standing there in the hot sun of the garden. If Méliés had wanted a stationary picture he should have used an ordinary camera: the whole point of moving pictures was that they moved. “What—” he said.

“Stand still,” Méliés said again. “Just a moment longer.”

Finally Méliés released him. “What was that about?” Stevens asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Méliés said.

He ran the film a few days after that. Stevens watched himself standing motionless in the garden, then turning and speaking to the camera. When the film ended Méliés sat for a moment, then brought up the light and said, “It didn’t work.”

“What didn’t work?”

“Remember when we did that magic, when I found that frog in my pocket? I was concentrating here, trying to imagine you growing wings, or sprouting horns—”

“Magic? You’re kidding me. You’re a grown man, you can’t possibly believe that stuff.”

“What about that frog, then? Where did that come from?”

“You had it with you.”

“No—”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” Stevens said. He felt slightly ridiculous, explaining this to a grown man, as if he were telling him that fire was hot, or knives were sharp. “The things we’re doing here, with the camera, they’re illusions, nothing more. Trick photographs, like the one with the hearse and the omnibus. And that’s what we should be working on, not wasting our time with this other stuff.”

Méliés said nothing, though Stevens sensed that he was not convinced. But he did not bring up magic again, and in the days that followed they invented new illusions that could be done with the camera. By November they finished their first picture showing a magic trick, *The Conjuring of a Woman in the House of Robert-Houdin*. It was the illusion Méliés had done in the theatre, a woman’s head floating through the air without her body.

Their films grew more elaborate. Méliés formed a company to produce them, Star Films, and hired more and more people, carpenters and actors and dressmakers. There was even a team of women coloring some of the films by hand, frame by frame, as Stevens and Méliés began to experiment with color.

The weather was turning cold, though, making it harder to film outdoors. “I’ve been thinking about a sort of studio,” Méliés said. “Something made out of glass, so we could take advantage of the light.”

Méliés drew plans and hired workers, and the building began to go up, a fantastic place of glass and wrought iron. But he had no formal training in architecture; the plans changed day by day as more and more problems appeared, and the work dragged on through the winter.

“It’s sagging now, they tell me,” Méliés said one day. “They’ll have to tear down the middle and start again. The thing is bankrupting me—they say it might end up costing ninety thousand francs.”

Ninety thousand francs, Stevens thought, remembering the single franc he had given the woman at the theatre. It seemed unreal, one of Méliés’s fantasies; he could not imagine having that much money.

He had been thinking of money more and more lately. His own was starting to dwindle, and already he was having to make sacrifices, to choose between a few meals and a winter coat.

Suddenly he resented Méliés, the man’s wealth, his mansion. Méliés would never understand true poverty, what it was like to work at something you hated, something forced upon you. For a long time he had managed not to think of his father's fishing boat, but now he realized how close he was to having to go back, and the thought horrified him.

He had resented that artist too, he remembered, the one who had had more talent than he did; it had been a petty, ugly feeling, and he had fought hard against it. And now here it was again, after all this time, and once again he felt helpless before it.

Méliés was looking at him, wondering, perhaps, why he had said nothing. "Is something wrong, my friend?" Méliés asked.

"I—my money's almost gone. I'm going to have to go home, go back to fishing."

"But that's terrible. Isn't there something you can do?"

"What? I'm a mediocre painter, and I can work a camera, and that's all." An idea came to him, suddenly, and he felt an unexpected hope. "What about—well, you can hire me. Pay me for what I'm already doing for free."

Méliés sighed. "I wish I could," he said. "But I meant it when I said the studio was bankrupting me. I can't —"

His resentment rose up again, overwhelmed him. "You pay all your other employees."

"Is that how you think of yourself, as an employee? I didn't think —"

"Of course you didn't think! You'd have to pay me if you did, and this way you get me to work for free. You make money renting out these films—do you think I didn't know that? And I don't see any of it, not a franc, while you build this—this monstrosity in your backyard."

"But I barely make anything, truly. You know that—you've seen how hard I work, how many films I have to make just to break even."

Stevens said nothing. Méliés could come up with the money somehow, he thought, sell his silverware or china or those awful paintings.

"There has to be a way," Méliés said. "Maybe the magic, we could work some magic together—"

“Magic! What are you, a child? Don’t tell me you still believe that ma-larkey.”

“All right, all right,” Méliés said. “Well, then, what about this? Remember that film we saw the other day, the one by Thomas Edison? He has a studio in New Jersey, the projectionist said. You could go work for him.”

The projectionist had been from the United States, in Paris to show films from Edison’s company. He had been delighted to meet other filmmakers, so enthusiastic he had not seemed to realize how many of Edison’s secrets he was giving away.

“No, I can’t,” Stevens said. “Edison’s a suspicious guy, the man said. He only hires people he knows.”

“What if I give you a reference?”

Stevens laughed bitterly. “A reference? What good would that do? The projectionist didn’t even know who you are—what makes you think Edison would?”

“I don’t know,” Méliés said, looking discouraged. “We’ll think of something, don’t worry.” He brightened. “Here—let me show you something. A new trick.”

So he hadn’t understood, Stevens thought. He never would, probably. Here he was, showing off his rich man’s toys, as if that was enough to make Stevens forget his problems.

They went inside the half-finished studio. “Look at this,” Méliés said. He picked up a sheet of glass and propped it up on one side.

An irregular portion at the top of the glass had been painted black. “See, you film *through* the glass,” Méliés said. “And then you paint a background on canvas, the same size as the black part, here, and you film that, you make a double exposure. You don’t have to build all those sets and carry them around anymore—you can just paint what you need, anything you like. It makes shooting outside much easier—and you can show some of the scenery, trees and grass and rivers, and then add the rest later, a ship, a palace. You can add ten stories to a building just by painting it.”

Stevens looked at the black paint at the top. A negative space, empty, and at the same time filled with possibility. He felt himself drawn inside it, and Méliés's words echoed within him: "Anything you like." He could take this technique to Edison, offer his services. Edison would have to hire him then.

He could say he invented it. Edison would never know the truth, and Méliés would be far away, across the ocean. He deserved a break, finally; he didn't have Méliés's rich father, his rich wife, and through no fault of his own he did not have the talent to be an artist. Really, it wasn't an invention at all, just some paint on a glass; anyone could have thought of it.

Méliés was smiling at him, waiting as always for congratulations. "Well?" he said. "What do you think?"

Stevens roused himself. "This—this is for me," he said.

* * * *

Edison's studio turned out to be as different from Méliés's as possible, a box of black metal with shuttered windows that could be opened to let in the light. Edison refused to see Stevens at first; then, after Stevens had returned several days in a row, he reluctantly let him inside.

He said nothing when Stevens showed him the glass technique, and Stevens nearly gave up finally, discouraged by his inhospitable manner. Then, after a long silence, Edison said, "Did you come up with this?"

"I did, yes," Stevens said.

"Good," Edison said. "We have to be careful these days—there are all kinds of people taking out patents, claiming to have invented this and that."

Edison gave Stevens his own room in the crowded studio. The work was challenging, different assignments every week, and he enjoyed using the skills he'd learned as an artist. He got a raise after his first year, then a bigger one. Directors asked his advice, and even Edison stopped by to talk to him.

More studios started up, Vitagraph and American Mutascope. One day he met a man from Vitagraph who asked him how Edison could afford to film in all those foreign places. Stevens laughed and hinted at mysterious techniques, and the man hired him immediately, at nearly double his salary.

Vitagraph was very different from what he was used to. Edison had insisted on secrecy, but here everyone shared their knowledge, worked together to solve problems. Stevens's glass technique had given him a reputation as a sort of wizard, and the other employees began to ask him for help. For the most part he was able to come up with solutions, but sometimes their problems were too much for him and he would think, very briefly, that Méliés would know what to do.

But he never wrote Méliés; the man had no place in his new life. He saw catalogs from Star Films every so often, films of flowers becoming women, women becoming stars, and he would remember the glass studio, the pane of glass painted black at the top. Sometimes he would feel bad for Méliés, even guilty, as if he had wronged the man somehow. Then he would tell himself that he had nothing to feel guilty about, and anyway Méliés was doing fine, his studio flourishing; there was no reason to worry about him.

One day a cameraman told him about a film he'd seen called *Voyage to the Moon*. "It's from Star Films, this outfit in Paris," the man said. "I swear, I don't know how the guy did half those tricks. They shoot off this rocket, and it lands on the moon, and these guys get out and walk around..."

"That's crazy," Stevens said. "You can't get to the moon."

"Maybe you can, someday. It's in this book by a French writer, scientific romances they call them."

"So what? That doesn't make it true."

"You should see this film, though."

"I'm too busy with my own pictures," Stevens said.

Stevens put the conversation out of his mind. But a few months later a letter with French postage came for him care of his studio. It had been sent by someone with the unlikely name of E. Smile, and it was only after Stevens opened it and saw the Star Films trademark that he realized the name was an anagram for Méliés.

* * * *

17 July, 1907

My Dear Stevens,

Word gets around, and I have learned that you are working at Vitagraph Studio these days. I have learned too that you are now a specialist in the glass technique I showed you. I hope you are doing good things with it, that you are carrying on in the tradition of Star Films.

For myself, I have been keeping busy. I’m still working at my crazy, hectic pace, but mostly I enjoy it. Some of my films have been shown in the United States—perhaps you have seen them? *Voyage to the Moon* is especially popular, though I don’t know why, I don’t think it’s one of my best. If you have seen it, though, it was probably a theft, a counterfeit. Unscrupulous men—gangsters, I think you would call them—are starting to copy my films and sell them as their own.

And this is not the worst of my troubles. There are now a great many film studios here in Paris, and the competition is fierce. In particular there are my own *betes noires*, the Pathé brothers, who have hired a dreadful man named Ferdinand Zecca to produce their films. Zecca’s first order of business, apparently, was to copy everything I ever did. I make a film about life at the bottom of the sea, he follows suit with a film called, with his usual inventiveness, *Drama at the Bottom of the Sea*. I make films about the devil, he makes *The Seven Castles of the Devil*. He has even built a studio in Montreuil, hoping perhaps that some of my thoughts will waft like smoke down the street and into his thick head.

All films are made by brothers these days, it seems, the Pathés, the Lumiéres. Even I have brought my brother Gaston into my company, and sent him to New York to look after my business in the United States. It was he, I should tell you, who told me where you were working.

And you—I think of you as my brother as well. I’ve never forgotten the way we met, first at the Lumiéres’ theatre and then again at my show at the Robert-Houdin. It was magic, as I told you then, and so was the work we did together after that.

I hope you are keeping well.

Your brother,

Georges Méliés

* * * *

Stevens felt a rush of pleasure. Dammit, but he’d missed the man, the fun they’d had, the way every day seemed to bring new excitement, new discoveries. They’d practically created a new kind of art by themselves, all the more amazing because they hadn’t known what they were doing from one day to the next. How had he forgotten that?

He read the letter again. This time, though, he saw things he had missed, and he remembered how annoying the other man could be. That guff about magic, for example—did Méliés still believe all that mumbo jumbo?

And what about the part at the beginning—”the glass technique I showed you”? Was Méliés claiming credit for that now? He was growing forgetful, probably; he had to be about fifty by now.

Stevens thought about the letter on and off, mislaid it, found it again. Finally, a few months later, he sat down to answer it.

* * * *

October 22, 1907

Brother Méliés,

Thanks for your letter! It was good to hear from you again.

They keep me busy painting these days. I just finished a huge castle, with towers and turrets and God knows what. I’ll tell you when the picture comes out—maybe they’ll show it in France so you can see it.

I met a terrific girl named Adele, a seamstress who works at the studio. I’m even thinking of marrying her, if you can believe that. Wish me luck!

All best wishes,

Nate Stevens

* * * *

Letters came from Paris every few months, and Stevens wrote back, but as time passed he felt more and more distant from Méliés. He married Adele and bought a house, and they had two children, a boy and a girl. He had responsibilities now, and Méliés, though he also had a wife, and now two children as well, began to seem frivolous, a child himself. His memories of that time started to fade, and when he thought of them at all he marveled that he had ever been so young.

* * * *

27 January, 1909

Brother Stevens,

I am having to deal with your old employer Thomas Edison, and I must tell you I am not enjoying the experience. He claims to have registered the first patent for the film camera, and he has forced all the studios who want to distribute their pictures in the United States to join his cartel. Well, of course I agreed—what choice did I have?

The Pathé brothers joined as well. And unfortunately we had to promise to create a certain number of films for the American market, and to sell them for the same price. And here is where they have the advantage of me, because my films cost more to make than theirs, and take longer. This is why, of course, they are superior to the Pathés' own pathetic productions. I am being forced into a ridiculous pace, and I don't know how much longer I can keep up.

But I don't mean to bore you with my troubles. Please write and tell me how you are doing.

Your exhausted brother,

Georges Méliés

* * * *

July 21, 1911

Dear Méliés,

Vitagraph didn't give me that raise I wanted, so I'm thinking of going somewhere else. I'm in a good position, too—I know all kinds of tricks the other studios don't. Someone even asked me how we can afford to shoot in all those exotic locations, out West and in the South Pacific and at the pyramids in Egypt.

In fact, by the time you get this I might be in California. All the companies are moving out there, to a town called Hollywood, because the weather's so good.

* * * *

13 August, 1911

Brother,

I try to picture you in Hollywood, although, as I know nothing at all about the place, I can only imagine it. I see you eating dates you have picked from your own date palm, which may be true, and riding in to work on a camel, which is probably not. One thing I am certain about is that you are still using that glass technique I showed you, painting out a drab studio here, painting in a richly decorated ballroom there. Anyway, I hope this letter reaches you, wherever you are.

I am not doing as well as you, unfortunately. The Pathés and that odious man Zecca are still causing me endless grief. I had no money for my latest film and was forced to go to them, hat in hand, and ask for their help with financing and distribution. They agreed, but only if I gave them my property and studio as a guarantee.

A few weeks ago I went to their studio, my heart trembling, to show them the new film, *The Hallucinations of Baron Munchhausen*. I truly believe this is my best one yet, filled with wonders, spider women and devils and dragons. It ran thirteen minutes, and I could feel every one of them, hear the racket from the film projector, even hear Zecca breathing.

And then it ended. Zecca put his head in his hands and was silent a moment, then surfaced with the pronouncement that it had to be longer. I told him he was wrong, that it was the perfect length, that it said everything it had to say.

He wasn't finished, though. The problem went deeper, he said. No one wants to see fantasy anymore. We live in an age of science, of radios and gramophones and aeroplanes. Only children still believe in giants and monsters.

I disagreed, of course. I did not tell him what I think about magic, though—even you never believed that. But I said that we needed fantasy, that science could never explain all the strange turns that life takes. That fantasy exists not in opposition to science but alongside it, each of them illuminating the other. He said that he was not there to discuss philosophy, that I was simply wrong, and the proof was that the Pathés were making money and I was not. The more I tried to explain, the less he seemed to understand. Finally I was reduced to shouting, and I told him that he ignored dreams at his own peril.

He was silent again, this time for much longer, and I realized that I had behaved very stupidly, that I had probably lost any hope I had of getting my film distributed. Then he said, sounding very reasonable, the great man of science, that Pathé studios would lose money if they abandoned the film now, that they would take it on and try to distribute it. All I had to do was add a few scenes.

I don't think he cared about the length, not really. He just wanted to insult me, to show me he's in charge. He's always been envious of me, always copying me, and now he has me in his power and he's enjoying it.

* * * *

Stevens read the letter, frowning. He didn't remember Méliés being so critical, so quick to blame his misfortunes on others. Méliés had been wrong, that was all there was to it, and Zecca had been right. Fantasy had gone out of style. People had been amused by camera tricks for a while, but now they wanted the pictures to be like life, only grander, more exciting. Millionaires really did throw lavish parties, and bandits really did rob trains, but no one had discovered a mermaid yet.

He moved to California a few months later, and in the confusion of packing, of taking the train across the country with his family, he lost the letter. When he thought of it again, driving to work past the orange fields of Los Angeles, he remembered only Méliés's bitterness, and he thought of how out of place it was in the bright sun of California.

* * * *

But a letter from Méliés caught up with him five years later, at Universal Studios.

* * * *

14 September, 1916

Dear Monsieur Stevens,

I have had a very bad time of it, these last few years. My wife Eugénie died in 1913, and my brother Gaston in 1915. I can no longer afford to produce my films, and for a while, to make ends meet, I performed my old magic shows at the Robert-Houdin. Then this terrible war started, and in addition to the tragedies all around me I was forced to close the theatre for a while. When I reopened it I discovered that few people these days go out in the evenings—and when they do, of course, they would rather see films. Some nights there were only four or five people in the audience, and in the end I had to give up performing and rent out the theatre.

Now I am desperately trying to support my grown children and their families, and I have been racking my brains for ideas. None of the studios here will hire me, not after the failure of my last few films to make money, and not after Ferdinand Zecca's attempts to turn them all against me. I don't know if I told you, but he claimed the rights to the last film I made, *Cinderella*, and then tried to kill it, using those butcher's knives of his to cut it from fifty-four to thirty-three minutes. I am sure he was afraid I would replace him at Pathé and was trying to discredit me, make me look like an idiot who has no business behind a camera.

I admit I despaired for a while. I thought a good deal of that first trick we ever did with the camera, the omnibus turning into a hearse, and I began to see it as an allegory. Everything turns to death in the end. Death is a greater magician than any of us.

Finally I thought of you, my friend, and it occurred to me that I might find a place at a studio in the United States. I remembered those wonderful days when we worked together, the discoveries we made. And I remembered too that glass technique I invented.

I never said a word to you when I found out you had taken this idea to the studios, not even when I heard you were claiming it for yourself. And I would not say anything now, but I am in desperate straits and need to ask a favor—if not for the sake of our friendship, which I think you have forgotten, then because you owe it to me. You've written often enough about your wealth, your success, your wonderful family, but none of that would have been possible without the black glass. I'm not even asking for money, just a simple thing, something you can do easily. Just a word from you to the right person. After all I've done for you, I deserve this much, at least.

I hope this letter finds you well.

Your brother in art,

Georges Méliés

* * * *

Stevens nearly threw away the letter in disgust. It wasn’t the man’s complaining that disturbed him, the whining tone, but the fact that Méliés seemed to blame everyone but himself. Of course Zecca had not turned the studios against Méliés—why would he bother, after all, when he was a big shot and Méliés a nobody? The man saw conspiracies everywhere—even Stevens, who had once been such a close friend, had become an enemy.

Stevens felt sorry for Méliés, of course he did. It was too bad the man had lost his wife and his brother in the space of only two years. He might have even tried to help, if not for all that self-pity.

The self-pity and the lying, those wild claims at the end. It was practically blackmail, and after all that talk about friendship. The friendship extended only as far as Stevens could help him, apparently. Then it was time to put the screws on.

But it was only blackmail if the other party had something to hide, and Stevens was certain he had done nothing wrong. He had come up with the idea fair and square. He ran the scene like a film in his mind, seeing the studio, the glass panes left lying around by the builders—but how had he thought of it? Had he picked up a brush and dipped it in black paint? Or had he simply seen the possibilities, how the trick could be done? There was Méliés, there was himself, but try as he might he could not remember the exact moment of invention.

Well, it was up to Méliés to prove his allegations. And Méliés had never written anything down; he was a terrible businessman, it was one of the reasons he had never succeeded in anything.

Stevens shook his head. Of course he had invented the technique. Méliés had gone senile, that was all, or been driven mad by his troubles. Stevens crumpled the letter and threw it in the trash.

* * * *

Ten years later Stevens got a divorce from Adele. She had begun to complain about his behavior: he had changed, she’d said; he had once been light-hearted, fun to be with, but lately he seemed more and more unhappy, even secretive. It was almost as if something weighed on him, something he had done long ago that was bothering him more and more as time passed. He had laughed and asked her what it was he was supposed to have done, if she thought he had a mistress hidden away somewhere, but she had just shaken her head and said that he had changed, that was all, she couldn't explain it.

His children were grown and he felt at loose ends, and he decided to go to Paris on vacation. He remembered how happy he had been there, and while he wasn't naive enough to think he could recapture his youth he felt the city would make a pleasant change. At the very least, he thought, it would not remind him of his wife.

At the back of his mind he had expected Paris to be the same, but of course it had changed a great deal in thirty years. He saw it first in the train station, which had grown to something monstrous, unfamiliar passages branching off in all directions. And when he stepped outside, too, everything was faster and louder, more automobiles, more people.

He visited the old cafés, but of course his artist friends weren't there any longer. New styles had come along since he had tried his hand at painting, cubism and dada and surrealism. His friends had been overtaken, made obsolete, just like so much else.

One day he found himself walking in a neighborhood that seemed familiar, though he could swear he had never seen any of the buildings before. Suddenly he realized that he had to be near the Théatre Robert-Houdin. He went looking for it, but the entire street was missing, razed to make way for a larger boulevard.

After three weeks he packed his bags and took the Métro to the train station. He thought without pleasure of the life he would be returning to, his work at the studio, his nights alone in his apartment. Paris had been a change of scenery, but nothing else had changed.

At the station people hurried along the platforms, called out to porters, met their friends. Trains clattered in and braked to a stop, whistling loudly, their smoke blowing out behind them. He looked for his train but got turned around somehow, lost in the maze the station had become, and the more he walked, it seemed, the farther from the trains and platforms he found himself.

Finally he came to a nearly deserted hallway, a great echoing space with rows of stalls stretching away on either side. The sounds here were muted; even the people moved more slowly. He continued on, passing stalls selling hats and postcards and umbrellas, shabby places with few customers.

He glanced at an old man behind a counter piled high with toys and sweets, looked away, looked back. The man seemed infinitely sad somehow, and Stevens wondered what had brought him to this place, why he wasn’t sitting by a fire somewhere, telling stories to his grandchildren.

But the man seemed familiar too. That neat goatee, that mustache ... As he watched a young girl walked up to the stand, drawn by the puppets and tops and wooden animals. The man smiled, a doting uncle looking at his niece, and Stevens realized that it was Méliés.

No, it couldn’t be. Méliés was behind a camera somewhere, making one of his improbable films. Or designing a costume, or waving a wand over a deck of cards. He couldn’t have come to this, a dingy counter in a dingy hallway.

Stevens slipped behind a pillar. The girl picked up one of the carved birds and examined it doubtfully. Suddenly the bird flew out of her hand and soared above the row of stalls, making for the ceiling high overhead. She laughed and threw back her head to follow it, watching as it dipped and rose between the rafters.

Méliés watched it too. He looked surprised, as if the bird had done something unexpected. He glanced up and down the hallway, and for a moment his gaze seemed to stop at Stevens’s pillar. Then he looked up again, following the bird’s flight, and Stevens let out a breath.

The bird came back, settled on the counter, changed back into a wooden toy. The girl laughed again and picked it up and studied it, more closely this time.

How the hell had the old man done that? Méliés had shown him some of his secrets, the mirrors and ropes and trapdoors, but there were no ropes here, and no sign of a mirror. And he would have needed a live bird somewhere, in his pocket or behind the counter. God knows Méliés was eccentric, more so than most men, but would he have kept a bird on the off-chance that someone would come along and pick up just that one toy?

Méliés looked up then, this time directly at him, and Stevens realized he had stepped out from behind the pillar to look at the bird. “Stevens!” the old man called. “It is you, isn’t it?”

His first thought was to run away. “Come over here, you devil!” Méliés said. “What are you doing in Paris?”

Stevens went toward the stall. The girl’s mother called her and she looked at the toys one final time, regretfully, and then walked away.

“You look good, my friend,” Méliés said. “Are you living here now?”

Stevens couldn’t say the same about Méliés. The years had marked him; Stevens had been right about the sadness, and Méliés looked tired, too, and even a little lost. He had to be about sixty-five, far too old to be standing in a drafty hall and selling toys.

“I—I was on vacation,” Stevens said. “I’m heading home.”

“Ah. And where is home, now? Are you still working for those studios?”

“That’s right.”

A toy on the counter moved toward him, a crocodile. Its mouth opened, showing rows of fine pointed teeth, and then closed. Stevens ignored it and looked impatiently at Méliés, wondering if the old man would ever grow up, ever get tired of those illusions of his. “How’d you manage that trick, the one with the bird?”

“I showed you some tricks before, I think.” Méliés smiled, not the kind smile he remembered but something harsher, even cynical. “One in particular, that you stole from me.”

“What are you talking about? I never stole anything from you, never.”

“No?” The smile was definitely unpleasant now, and Méliés’s eyes flashed briefly with what looked like hatred. “What about that glass technique?”

“You’re crazy. That was mine—I invented it.”

“Did you?” A top began to spin, then slowed and fell back to the counter.

“Of course I did. You forgot, that’s all.”

“I’m a senile old man now, is that it?”

“You said it, not me. And I didn’t appreciate you blackmailing me, in that letter. I might even have helped you, if you hadn’t—”

“So you did get that letter.”

For a moment Stevens felt embarrassed. But what did he have to be embarrassed about, after all? A puppet hanging behind the counter twisted in its strings, rattling like a skeleton, and then went still. “Yeah, I did. And I would have helped you, like I said, but then you had to threaten me. I—”

“It was the truth. Did that threaten you?”

“It wasn’t the truth, can’t you get that through your thick skull?” Some of the other stall-keepers were looking at him now, and he lowered his voice. There had to be some way to make this man see reason. “Look, you didn’t use to be like this. You got bitter over the years. Okay, that’s understandable, with everything you went through. But you have to put that behind you, remember all the good times. All those films you got to make. You know what I think, about the work I did? That it’ll still be there, a long time after I’m dead. People will still go to the pictures, and they’ll see it. We’re immortal, people like us.”

“My films are gone, though.”

“What?”

“They’re gone, most of them. They took my negatives during the war, and they made boot-heels out of them. I think about that sometimes. All those people, all over Paris, walking on stars and skulls and feathers...”

Stevens glanced down the hallway, looking for a clock. He had to get away; it was like he’d thought, the old man had gone senile.

“How did I do that trick with the bird?” Méliés said abruptly. “It was magic.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is. Magic doesn’t exist.”

“A lot of things don’t exist, according to you. Friendship, for one.”

“All right, that’s it. I don’t have to stand here and take this.”

“One minute longer, and I’ll let you go.” Stevens looked down the hallway again, looked back. “I learned a few things about magic over the years, though I still can’t create it on my own. The two of us, though—do you remember what I said about our bond, about how we can work magic together? I know how to do it now. And I don’t need your consent any longer, just your presence. Here—I’ll show you.”

Everything disappeared, turned black: the stall, the corridor, the train station. “It wasn’t the theft,” Méliés’s voice said in the darkness. “I would have given you the glass technique if you’d asked, given it gladly. It was what you did afterward.”

Something appeared in the blackness, slowly, as if it were being painted. Then Stevens was inside it somehow, and he looked around, his heart pounding.

It was a house, with walls and windows and scattered furniture. He ran to the door, twisted the knob, pushed against it, but it didn’t move. He beat on it with his fists, shouted something, he wasn’t even sure what.

He stepped back and took a breath. This was another of the old man’s illusions, nothing more. He’d rigged something up, some kind of background like the ones in his films.

He went to the window and looked out. A meadow stretched before him, some cows, a windmill and a river in the distance. He tugged on the window but it seemed locked, like the door. He picked up a chair and threw it.

The glass broke. He gripped the sill and pulled himself up, then tumbled outside. Pain lanced his hand, and he saw that he had cut it badly on the shards of glass. A drop of blood fell to the floor.

He looked up quickly. He was back in the house, the same walls around him, the same tables and chairs. The window was still broken, though, and he climbed through it again, more carefully this time.

And found himself back inside the house. “All right!” he said, shouting. “Enough is enough! What do you want from me?”

Everything turned black again. Then a new scene took shape around him, slowly, the unseen painter filling out another canvas.

A room formed out of the dark, a different one this time. It was shaped like an egg, the floor and walls curved. A door stood in front of him; he made his way toward it carefully, but as he suspected it was locked.

He glanced up and saw two windows high above him, too far to reach. A telescope looked out of each of them. And above that there was nothing, black paint, a blank space waiting to be filled.

It was a head, he realized. The windows were eyes, the door a mouth. A ladder materialized against the wall. He began to climb.

He reached one of the telescopes and looked through it. Stars and planets swam past him, then a woman perched on a crescent moon, combing her hair. An omnibus came by, and changed into a hearse. A locomotive roared through the blackness, skeletons sitting and grinning at every window. A sun moved toward him, growing until it filled the circle of the eyepiece.

The sun came closer still. He could see a city on its surface now, a street, a house. A window, and another skeleton looking out.

It was moving too fast, they would collide at any minute. He cried out, jerked away from the telescope. He ran farther up the ladder, not thinking now, wanting only to get away. He reached the black space and went through.

There was nothing inside it, nothing at all. He waited for the artist to begin painting again, but the darkness remained. He felt out toward the ladder, but it was gone.

“Stop it!” he shouted. “Stop it! What do you want from me? I’ll do it, whatever it is. Anything. Just let me go!”

The blackness pressed in around him. He flailed outward, trying to touch something, anything. “What do you want from me?” he said again.

He shouted some more. He screamed without words, hoping to hear an echo. Nothing came.

He began to wonder, finally, how he was able to stand. He sat and reached out around him and felt some kind of floor, smooth and even. He beat against it with his fists, but it made no noise. It’s made out of darkness, he thought. Everything here is made out of darkness.

He stood and walked forward carefully, his hands out. He came to the curved wall and felt along it; it was as smooth as the floor. He hit it a few times, angrily, but nothing happened.

He sat against the wall and stared into darkness. He stood and shouted for a while, at Méliés, the unknown painter, the darkness. He sat back down, drew his legs up, clasped his hands around his knees. He rocked slowly back and forth. He stood up and screamed again.

He passed a long time like this, how much he never knew. And finally he understood something, he knew where he was. He was in his own head.

And he was nothing, no one. Not a husband, not a father. Not a good man. He had done something, stolen something...

The blackness lightened, and Méliés appeared before him. Méliés stood in his half-finished studio; light shone on him through the glass, and he was holding a pane of glass too, with a section blacked out at the top. He pointed to the glass and said something, silently, as if he were in one of his moving pictures.

Stevens flushed, remembering that day. All right, perhaps he had stolen the idea. But really, what difference did it make? Méliés would have given it to him anyway, he had even said so.

It wasn’t the theft, though. It was afterward, when the guilt of what he had done had begun to worm its way through his gut. He’d tried to forget, tried to put as much distance as he could between them. Tried to despise the man, because otherwise he would have despised himself.

And so he had turned away when Méliés had asked for help. He had denied their bond, had taken the pure gold of Méliés’s generosity and never repaid it.

He stood up and spoke into the empty space around him. “I don’t know what you want,” he said. “I don’t know what I can do, after all this time. I think you want me to say that I’m sorry. And I am. I am sorry.”

Nothing happened. He was still inside his head. I’m not a good man, he thought again. And I don’t think I can bear my own company for very much longer.

The darkness began to lift. He heard other sounds finally, after what seemed like a lifetime of his own screaming. Footsteps, voices. The whistle of a train, and the screech of brakes.

He was back in the train station, near the platforms. He twisted his head back and forth, panicked, expecting at any moment to see a part of the station disappear into blackness.

He had to move, to hurry, had to break out of the fear that held him. Méliés might not have meant to let him go, might return at any moment. Someone came toward him out of the crowd, a smiling old man with a mustache and goatee. He ran.

There was his platform, up ahead. He ran faster. A train passed him, screaming as it braked. He glanced up. Skeletons looked out from every window, their eyes empty.

He stumbled, cried out. When he looked again the skeletons were gone, replaced by living men and women. He must have imagined it; he'd been confused by the harsh light of the station.

The train stopped. The doors opened, and he hurried up the stairs. He'd lost his luggage, he saw. He didn't much care.

* * * *

He went back to Hollywood, and to his paintings. He worked hard, trying to keep busy, trying not to think about what had happened in Paris. Sometimes, though, despite his best efforts, he would falter, and then darkness would rise up around him, and his mind would create impossible things, castles and devils breathing fire. Once he saw a hearse drive past and he stood pinned to the street, unable to move for terror.

Sometimes, even worse, he would see nothing but the darkness, and his old despair would return, the feeling that he was nothing, was empty. That he had acted badly, had wronged an old friend.

The moments were brief, no more than a second or two. When he came back to his real life he would wonder how long his mind would play tricks on him this way, when he would finally be able to put his experience in the train station behind him.

But the black moments also reminded him of what he had discovered about himself, and he tried to be as generous as Méliés once was. He encouraged the younger artists at the studio, showing them things he had learned over the years: tricks of perspective, how to paint clouds. He took an interest in his children; he even tried to be patient with Adele.

Yet he never wrote to Méliés, though he thought about the other man a great deal. At first he could not decide what to say, where to start. Then he realized that it was his shame that held him back, and by then it was too late, too much time had passed.

He did some research, and talked to a few people, and finally he sent a letter to the *Ciné-Journal* in Paris. He wrote that he had seen Georges Méliés working in a train station, that that was a shameful way to treat a pioneer of film, that something should be done.

A while later someone from the journal sent him an article. It was by a journalist named Léon Druhot; it said that Druhot had “discovered” Méliés, that a gala was being planned in Méliés’s honor, that a cache of films had been found. Someone had even offered the old man an apartment; Stevens contributed money to it, anonymously.

He was sixty when he retired. He moved to Arizona, met a widow, married her. He began to feel content with his life, and the darkness came less and less often.

The sunsets in Arizona were amazing, gold and saffron and purple, like nothing he had ever seen. They looked like a backdrop, as if a portion of the sky had been blacked out and a painting of spectacular colors filmed in its place. He enjoyed looking at them, most of the time.

Sometimes, though, he wondered about the unseen artist behind them, the magician who had created the illusion. He remembered the skeletons on the train, and the other things he’d seen since then, the pictures he’d put down to his imagination. And horror would sweep over him, and he would wonder if all his life since his last meeting with Méliés had been one long illusion, if he had ever truly left the train station.