

MAGIC

The jet engines roared, the sky did a cartwheel, and, far below, drowning in the waves, Haiti shrank to a smudge. Nine-year-old Carlton Joubert, who was sitting next to Grandma, wasn't feeling too good. He couldn't find where his feet were supposed to be, and his shirt was wet, and his teeth wouldn't stop chattering. He didn't know what to do. He tried everything, first humming *Amazing Grace* and then whispering a prayer, but the world only spun worse and worse. He thought he saw a rat out of the corner of his eye and everything went black, and it seemed like an awful long time before the lights came back on. He couldn't stand it one second longer. Now, he didn't have any choice. He was going to have to do that wicked stuff Grandma had warned him never to even think about.

He glanced all over the place. Three rows up, a nun munched on a pretzel; across the aisle, a thin man snored; and, close at hand, Grandma had her nose in a magazine. Nobody was watching. Quickly, he pretended to put on white gloves and a black top hat *Grandpa had told him that make-believe wouldn't solve anything.* He adjusted his red bow tie and tugged on his coattail *Grandpa had said you couldn't hide your troubles behind illusions.* He straightened his ruffled silk shirt *Grandpa had said that real magic didn't have anything to do with trickery.* He looked around once more.

“Hocus-pocus,” he whispered, waving his wand, and, wow, what had been his cup of water was now a bottle of cherry cola. He took a deep breath, chanted, “Abracadabra,” and passed a donkey through a drain pipe. But the first two stunts were mere warm-ups. Next, Carlton prepared the only trick that mattered, snatching a pair of brand-new feet smack dab out of nowhere. After twirling his make-believe hat on his finger, he tossed it into the air, caught it upside down, set it on a stool, and plunged both hands inside. At first, he couldn’t find anything, and he fumbled around, his vision blurring, but then, just when all seemed lost, he spied the feet he’d been searching for. He grabbed, yanked, secured his grip ...

Grandma’s head popped out from between the pages of her magazine, and she got Carlton's shoulder blade between her bony fingers. “You’d better cut out the spooky mumbo-jumbo.” She felt his forehead. “Child, you’re burning up.”

Carlton disappeared again into blackness, thinking about Haiti and how his feet didn’t work. He awoke slowly, feeling flushed and shaky, like he’d been standing too close to a bonfire. He tried wiggling his toes inside his patched-up shoes but couldn’t feel a thing. After a while, his eyelids grew heavy again, but then he roused himself and gazed out the window. He drifted, looked again, and drifted. *But was he asleep or wasn’t he? If he were really asleep, could his feet feel like balloons about to pop.*

Just when it seemed like the journey would go on forever, the plane shivered, a woman shrieked, and a pair of glasses flew into the air. Suddenly, Carlton saw it all, right to the end. First would come an explosion and a burnt toast smell, followed by more blasts, black smoke, and a sound like machine gun fire. Then the jet would break apart, wings and wheels snapping, glass shattering, passengers bouncing around like bowling

pins. After this voyage halfway across the map, he was going to end up just another kid in a coffin. He saw the skull and crossbones on a bottle of poison, the Devil grinning at him through a wall of flames. *And had the Devil made his toes curl up in that funny way?* He screamed silently to Jesus, hoping against hope he'd end up in the good place, remembering all the bad things he'd ever done.

Unbelievably, Jesus answered, and Carlton's heart thumped like a drum. "Say what?" he whispered, cupping a hand behind his ear. "I need to hear you bad." Jesus repeated himself more clearly, this time in Grandpa's voice, even though Grandpa was still in Haiti, and Carlton laughed. "Wow," he whispered, his ears popping, his eyes blinking.

He remembered that Jesus - or maybe Grandpa? - was still on the line. He took a deep breath. "Thanks a million. I won't ever forget this." "No problem," Grandpa - or maybe Jesus? - answered, his voice faint as the wind.

The plane bumped down hard, Carlton's stomach mashed against the seat belt, and then they were on the ground, rolling slower and slower. Grandma dug her fingers into his arm. "So, we've made it to New York City, safe and sound. How'd you like your first jet airplane ride?" Carlton turned, clamping down on his grin. He glanced at the yellow flowers on her wrinkled dress and at her trembling lips, then gazed into her moist brown eyes. "Okay, I guess."

It was sort of okay, but it sort of wasn't. Except for the landing, the ride on the jet had been more fun than checkers with Grandpa. But now sweat dripped off his ears while he shivered in teeth-chattering waves. His head hurt and his stomach churned. His eyes were crusty. His ankles were purple and swollen. He had to get to his uncle's apartment in

New York so he could lie down and sleep. But he felt something else, like he was mouse trapped in an open field, scurrying this way and that beneath the shadow of something terrible, and he needed to look up before it got its claws into him, but couldn't, not now, not ever.

The bad stuff had started two years ago in Haiti, while Mommy was still running around with the church people in California, USA. He'd had a blister on the bottom of his foot which left a trail of blood after he'd chased a chicken across the yard. At first, nobody thought anything about it, but then the blister wouldn't heal, turning instead into an oozing hole. A second wound started up on his other foot. Grandma took him to a doctor with a beard who put on bandages with ointment, then taught him how to make paper planes. Gradually, it got to where he couldn't feel anything in his toes, and it became hard for him to bend his feet at the ankles. He tried walking tippy-toes, but, after a while, he could only crawl. Grandma took him to another clinic, this one smelling like garbage, where scarecrow people bundled in rags hobbled around on crutches. The doctors there suggested leg braces, but, when Grandma asked what the problem was, they only shook their heads.

Because he could no longer walk, Grandma took him out of second grade where Catholic nuns had spanked his palms with a ruler, and, all day long, he sat around watching Grandpa paint pictures of ships. Sometimes, when he got bored, he'd play the keyboard Grandpa had given him. Grandpa, a tall man with a soft voice who was losing his hair, liked to stroll to the park. Once, after he got home, he'd taught Carlton how to make a kite out of bamboo and paper.

One morning, Grandpa patted his hand and said, "I can't say how or why, but I know it will be all right in the end." Then he told Carlton how flowers turn toward the sun, and how salmon find their way thousands of miles back through rivers and streams to the place where they were spawned, and how penguins stand motionless for months in the darkness of an Antarctic winter to protect their mate's eggs. When Carlton punched his own legs, screaming, "But what does that have to do with my feet?" Grandpa said, "You have eyes, boy, but you can't see."

Out of the blue one day, Mommy appeared in the doorway with her suitcase, singing, "Hallelujah," and thumping her Bible, but when Carlton crawled to the door to greet her, she raised her eyebrows and shrieked, "What in the name of Jesus?" For a few weeks, Mommy left for church all the time, coming back late on days when there was machine gun fire in the park nearby. Then, without warning, she dragged her suitcase to the door, this time preparing to fly off to New York City to stay with his uncle the engineer.

"Please don't go away again, Mommy," Carlton said, sobbing, crawling after her, grabbing her by the skirt.

Mommy undid his hands, then made the sign of the cross. "It's God's will, Carlton, if Satan doesn't get inside the plane's engine and make it crash.

For the next several months, Carlton's feet oozed and swelled, red lines flowing between his toes, sometimes disappearing, but always coming back. One day, Grandpa rolled him to the park in a cart, and they watched a street magician perform. He pulled colored handkerchiefs out of his sleeves, thrust swords through boxes, and made oranges turn into bananas, but, at the end of the show, he did something even crazier, getting a

man to throw down his crutches and scream, "Glory be to the Lord." After Carlton whispered, "Wow," Grandpa scoffed, explaining that it was all smoke and mirrors. Later, Carlton pleaded with Grandpa to let him read a book on incantations, saying, "It can't hurt, and you never know," and Grandpa finally gave in after warning him, "Boy, it will only give you false hope." When Carlton went to Grandma for reassurance, she screeched, "Don't you be messing around with that evil eye stuff."

What was he to do? He was terrified of getting involved with creatures of darkness, and Grandpa was no doubt right that it wouldn't work anyway. But the doctors had done nothing, while Grandpa had only recommended patience. Sometimes he twisted back and forth on his mattress until daybreak, praying and kissing the wooden cross he wore around his neck. Finally, one terrible day, his purplish feet throbbing, he reached the edge of the bottomless pit.

He waited until Grandma had gone to the market and Grandpa had headed off for the park, then took out his book, trying not to think about the gulf he was about to cross, and went over all the spells, mouthing the words and tracing them with his finger. For days, he secretly repeating what he'd learned, waiting for a hurricane to sweep him out to sea. At first, nothing happened, and, after a week, he was about to drop the whole thing, but then one morning he thought maybe he could move his feet better – no, he was almost sure of it – and they didn't feel half as numb as before. He manipulated his feet with his fingers, pinching them and letting them drop. Feeling dreamy, he started crawling over to share the good news with Grandpa and Grandma, but before he made it past the sofa, he stopped short.

Finally, just after Carlton turned nine, the next-door neighbor with the telephone knocked at the door. It was Mommy, calling long distance. She'd gotten a job in Brooklyn, USA, working as housekeeper for a judge, and the judge had made arrangements with a hospital to get Carlton and Grandma airline tickets and visas. "It's a miracle, Carlton," Mommy said, speaking extra loud over the thousands of miles. "You better get down on your hands and knees and pray."

After he got off the phone, he told Grandpa, "But my feet are almost better." "Don't be afraid," Grandpa had said. "They can work wonders in the United States. But you have to be strong and face up to things."

Now the plane taxied to a stop, and Grandma lifted him into a wheelchair, the first he'd ever sat in, and rolled him off the airplane, down a ramp, and through a door. They halted in front of a black wall with a button on it. Grandma pressed it, and the button turned red. After a moment, as if by magic, the wall opened like a robot's mouth turned on its side. Before Carlton could object, Grandma had pushed him into a small room, and the mouth had closed, swallowing them up. The room vibrated, the wall to the room opened again, and suddenly they were gazing into a fairy's palace, lined with glass, swimming with colors, and echoing like thunder. Swarms of people scurried about like ants. Carlton gasped, his jaw dropped, and his arms flew back.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"That was an elevator, child," Grandma said.

"Elevator," he whispered. "Wow."

She shoved him through with a bump. Over and over, as they rolled down a hall lined with telephones in glass boxes, he replayed the wall opening up and what he'd seen next.

They stopped in front of a rotating ramp hopping with luggage. Grandma snatched off their suitcases, jostling a man dressed in gray stripes and shiny shoes. When they stepped through a door to the outside, paralyzing cold slapped him, like nothing he'd ever felt, worse than rain or ice down your back.

His uncle came around a corner, dressed like an undertaker, his hair slick and shiny, and then he was huddled in his uncle's car, wrapping his thin suit around his shoulders, hearing honks and shattering glass, smelling his uncle's cigar smoke, and staring at buildings poking holes in the clouds. It seemed nothing like Port-au-Prince or anywhere else.

He closed his eyes, feeling sleepy. *Want to go home*, he prayed. Their house in Haiti was an old unpainted wooden building. Inside, the single large room had been divided off with curtains into places for him, Mommy, Grandma and Grandpa, and the homeless sixteen-year-old girl living with them who helped Grandma cook greens and sweep the plank floor. Once, he'd peeked at the girl while she washed herself, and, a month later, she'd pulled his hand up her dress. Another time, Grandma had whipped him so bad his back was sore for days, using a strap she'd bought at the grocery store, but he'd had it coming for running around.

The house had no windows, so when soldiers in jeeps were shooting up the neighborhood, or if there were a hurricane, all you had to do was latch the door. When it rained, you put down basins to catch the leaking water. Rats scratched around under the

floorboard, but they owned an orange cat, and so, at least during the day, the rats kept to their place and everybody else kept to theirs. Outside, there was an outhouse with a hole in the ground, and, nearby, a coal burning stove.

While his uncle drove through New York City, sliding by yellow cars like crazy, Carlton eyes closed, and he started to doze off, remembering the last Mardi Gras in Port-au-Prince when dragon-shaped floats drifted by, and how Grandpa had let him read books about Count Dracula and King Arthur. Grandpa had told him, "Sometimes, if you look hard enough, you can see worlds, and even galaxies, swirling around within a single blade of grass." He laughed drowsily. All in all, everything had been peachy good. If he could just get back there, nothing would ever have to change.

Now, while his uncle parked the car, he woke up, terrified, okay, then scared all over again. They got out and hurried inside, riding up another elevator. He felt dizzy, afraid he'd throw up the bag of peanuts he'd eaten on the plane. When his uncle opened the door to his apartment, Mommy rushed forward out of the shadows like she was on fire, hugging and kissing him, shrieking, "My baby, my baby," and "Praise Jesus," and "In the name of the Holy Spirit," until he said, "All right, already." After she looked at his feet, she cringed, shook her head, and mumbled, "It's the devil's work."

Later, Mommy, making the sign of the cross, showed him how to use the toilet, shower, and sink, unfolded the couch in the living room, and tucked him in underneath a quilt, then kneeled next to him and prayed. As soon as she left, he threw his covers off and sat up, and in a few seconds was no longer Carlton, but Merlin, prince of the magicians, wearing a blue satin robe with bell sleeves and a tall pointy hat.

He concentrated, and a wizard's ball took shape before him. At first, he only saw pink smoke inside, but then the smoke blew away, and he saw himself as a young child in Haiti, running around like crazy. Just as his eyes started to fill with tears, two strong, straight feet appeared within the globe, unmarred by swelling or reddish lines, just like the ones he'd seen on the plane. Impossibly, these feet drifted out of the globe and merged with his, and, as sleep rolled over him, he knew that soon he would walk; in fact, he was almost certain of it.

The next morning, they were driving again. He was sweating up his favorite shirt, tingling, licking his cracked lips. When he tried sticking his head out the window, Mommy yanked him back inside. "Be gone, unclean spirits," she said, shaking him.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To Shriners Hospital in Philadelphia." Grandma said sternly. "And don't you forget it."

Philadelphia, with its rumbling trucks and tall buildings, felt as spooky as New York City. After they got out and crossed over a concrete lot filled with cars, Grandma rolled him down a hallway and into a mirror bright room. When he struggled to get out of the wheelchair, Grandma pushed him back in.

Soon, a bunch of doctors with flashlights on their heads were putting metal things on his chest and back, sticking wood in his mouth, tapping, probing, scribbling things down on pads, nodding, and whispering. When one of them touched his foot, he screamed.

Mommy whispered, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," and Grandma said, "If it hurts that bad, bite your tongue."

After he was admitted, they took him upstairs *wow, an elevator again*, and suddenly Grandma and Mommy were waving goodbye. Mommy held a greasy Bible in one hand. "Trust in the Lord, Carlton," Mommy said.

"But when are you coming back?"

"We're going to the bathroom, and then maybe to get a bite to eat with your uncle," Grandma said.

That made Carlton feel a little better. It would be a quick visit, and then one, two, three and skedaddle. He remained in a large room filled with beds surrounded by curtains. Most of the curtains were open, and he saw white, black, and brown kids, some with slanty eyes, some with braces around their necks. Others were out of bed, moving about in wheelchairs or on crutches. A man dressed in white showed him to his bed and pulled up the metal sides. After a few minutes, a nurse brought him a platter of fried chicken and mashed potatoes. When no one was looking, he stuck a piece of chicken in the potatoes, bit, chewed, and swallowed. He took another bite. It was the best he'd ever tasted. Then he vomited, and a nurse ran over to clean him up.

After a while, when he'd woken from a nap, the shadow of the thing returned. His grandmother and mother were still missing. *When were they coming back?* They'd said they were just going to use the bathroom and then get food. *Maybe they weren't coming back.* All the nurses milling around were mumbling in some gibberish he couldn't understand. Mommy and Grandma had been acting like secret agents, whispering, not looking him in the eyes. And it shouldn't be taking that long to eat, even a big meal with apple pie for dessert. A nurse took him to lie under a humming machine, and then the nurse rolled him back to his room. *They weren't coming back.* He waited, watching the

white double doors. Grandpa had told him that everything was going to be all right, but Grandpa had also said he had to be strong. If everything were going to be all right, then why did he have to be strong? *They weren't ever coming back.* The thing overhead swooped lower, and the shadow he ran around in grew dark as soot.

When it got murky outside the windows, he started to moan, then screamed. The other children looked up and somebody went, "Shh," but he couldn't stop howling. He bellowed and yelled, his hands trembling. Tears streamed out of his eyes, and his breath came fast. The nurses tried everything, soothing him with words he couldn't understand, pushing him around in a wheelchair, showing him the huge television on the wall and holding up a toy which flashed blue-and-green. Still he sobbed, on and on.

It got to be late at night. *They weren't ever coming back.* He caught a nurse's eye and pointed at a wheelchair, then squeezed his hands together in a pleading gesture. She felt his forehead, shrugged her shoulders, and gave in, gently helping him on board. When nobody was looking, he rolled himself out the white double doors and down a hall, making his escape *if only he could find the elevator again.* It was tough going, and he panted and strained, pausing to rest every few rolls. After a while, he neared something that looked like the keyboard Grandpa had given him, but larger, like a brown shelf with keys. Maybe he could play some of the songs Grandpa had taught him, and then it would be like Grandpa was with him. He rolled forward, closer and closer, stretching out a hand, almost there, should he hit the black keys first or the white ones ...

A voice behind him said, "Mr. Joubert." His body jerked, then relief washed over him, because these were the first words he'd understood since he'd been left. He swiveled his wheelchair around, panting. A blond-haired nurse stood there smiling. "Mr. Joubert,"

she said again, followed by something he couldn't make out, then wheeled him back down the hall and through the double doors to his bed, hoisted him on top of it and pulling up his covers. In the middle of the night, she woke him to take his temperature and give him pills.

Many days later, after he'd swallowed hundreds of pills more, he found he could wake up a little bit, and the swelling in his feet had gone down. They brought in a woman who spoke French, which was like Creole, so he could sort of make out what she was saying.

"See," she said brightly. "I knew they weren't going to have to cut off your feet."

Cut off my feet, he thought unsteadily. *So that's why they'd brought him here*. He remembered that Grandpa had told him that someone might be at the center of an explosion where everyone else is killed and walk away unharmed.

The woman explained that shortly they'd be giving him a bath with germ-killing soap, and afterwards he couldn't eat or drink anything for the rest of the night. In the morning, they'd be putting him to sleep, and later he'd wake up with casts on his legs. He couldn't quite figure what she was talking about, and cold fingers crawled up his back, the claws of the thing.

He asked, "What's wrong with me?"

She said, "They think it's Charcot-Marie-Tooth syndrome."

His stomach turned to ice. "What are they going to do?"

"Tendon release surgery, so maybe you can walk again."

After the woman left, he conjured himself into a black wool cape with red satin lining, his fingernails coming to points, his face hidden in shadows. His heart pounded

when he thought how this was to be his last chance, and he gave it his best, rolling dice made of bones and reading his fortune in a chicken's insides, but he couldn't tell if anything was taking hold.

Then a cauldron took shape before him, filled with steaming liquid, and witches were stirring it, and they offered it up to him in a ladle which had CJ written on its side in rust. At first, he pushed it away, but, as a last resort, he ventured a sip. To his surprise, it tasted delicious, like lemons and bacon strips, and instantly his feet surged with power.

It was morning, and a man in a white suit was wheeling him down the long hallway, past the keyboard, *elevator again*, doctors nodding, nurses waving. He yearned to get out and play the keyboard, maybe for the last time. "I'm okay already," he tried to say, his voice scratchy, but nobody listened *it didn't matter, because the potion he'd swallowed protected him from all harm.*

When he arrived in the operating room, the nurses patted his head, held his hands, and put a cap on him. But then somebody lowered a mask onto his face, and he started twisting, awful tasting gas choking him, and the thing swooped for the kill. *Never going to play with Grandpa again. Never going to see Grandma or Mommy.* He tried to tear the mask off, but hands restrained him, and fumes smothered him *but hold on, hold on, last night's magic would not, could not let him down.*

At some point he seemed to be waking up *the magic rubbing its eyes*, smelling flowers and feeling fresh linen *the magic yawning*, but then awareness was ripped away, and he was hurled head-over-heels into a whirlpool, lying in a room with no windows, the walls spinning, about to throw up, throwing up, drifting off again. He was back in Haiti, lying on a sandy beach, warm waves lapping over him, but then the sky turned

dark, streaked with lightening, and he was pelleted by cold rain. A man dressed in black carrying a cross mumbled over him *the magic drenched in sweat*, sprinkling something on his face *the magic gasping*, the Virgin Mary stretched out her arms *the magic going limp*, the elevator opened *no, no, not ready to die*, and whoosh, sounds faded and the lights went out.

Hundreds of years passed. He opened his eyes into the glow of dawn, and it was like he was seeing things for the first time: the sky-blue curtains, the roses on the table near his bed, his walls sparkling like lace. But was he in heaven or the other place?

A needle attached to a tube stuck out of his arm, plaster covered his feet and legs, and his ankles were held high by straps. He felt himself all over. Everything sounded muffled and his head throbbed, but otherwise no scrapes, scratches, or burns. He didn't feel any flames, which meant he probably wasn't in the bad place. So it was over, and the thing hadn't torn him to pieces, at least he was pretty sure it hadn't.

One moment, he was alone, and the next, the nurse who spoke French had stepped from some fold in the air and was serving him juice.

"Am I dead?"

"Not on your life," she said, smiling down at him. "But, for a while, it was touch and go. You had an infection, and you've been out cold for two days. We had a priest come in and perform the last rites. But your fever has broken, and we think you're going to make it."

That evening, after he woke up again, the same nurse brought him ginger ale and saltine crackers. A week later, they wheeled him back to his old room, and later he talked to Mommy and Grandma on the phone. He found out they'd returned to New York City.

"When am I coming home?"

"You're going to have to stay put for a while. But you'll have the Holy Spirit to keep you company until I get there."

After he got off the phone, he took deep breaths, trying to turn everything right side up. It felt like the plane ride from Haiti, the buildings tall as churches, the hospital, and the surgery were all parts of a dream, and he'd woken up on the moon.

Something clicked into place. Grandpa seemed to float near his bed, smiling, nodding, a bamboo kite in his hand. Carlton steeled himself, clenched his fists, took a deep breath, and glanced up at the ceiling. He looked again. He looked a third time. No shadow, no hawk, no witch on a broomstick, just nothing, nowhere, never.

Grandpa, who wasn't really there, patted him on the shoulder. He wished he could watch Grandpa suck on a peppermint stick or guzzle down a cherry soda. Grandpa smiled at him. "Don't worry, Carlton. Everything will turn out for the best." Carlton thought about it, believing, not believing, his fingers trembling, his cheeks going hot and cold. Suddenly, a grin stretched across his face. *The magic hadn't failed him after all.*

Yes, it was true, that silly old pretend magic he'd clung to had let him down, but, deep inside, he'd always known it would. However, the other type of magic, the kind Grandpa had tried telling him about, the enchantment which glistened off dewdrops, the feeling you got when you saw starlight on the surface of a lake, had done its job, even while he'd been looking in the wrong direction. He'd been clinging to the edge of a cliff,

and yet some hand had dragged him to safety; and Mommy, who had left again (she'd been scared, too), was coming back; and here he was, alone in a strange place, hardly able to move, and yet smiling all the same. It was a lot to think about. He whispered to Grandpa, "Wow, but that was some elevator ride. "

The End