

Magic Max
By Marc Simon

Uncle Max could do pretty much anything with his hands—rewire small appliances, build cabinets, make and lay hardwood flooring and so on. He knew how install sinks and toilets, how to rewire light fixtures, install a gas line in a clothes dryer. He set up a toy airplane in his basement that flew along a wire he'd strung from one end to the other. The propeller spun and wing lights flashed. When I was eight I thought it was the greatest thing in the world. I wished I were his son and would have gladly traded places with my cousin Anne.

I'd come back to Pittsburgh for my thirtieth high school reunion, which served as a reminder of how much I'd hated high school. My return flight to Denver wasn't until the following afternoon, so I decided to visit Max. I hadn't seen him for twenty-five years. He lived at the Hebrew Home for the Aged, where his only child, my cousin Anne had moved him after Aunt Rose passed away.

The morning was sunny and breezy without much humidity, unusual for August in Pittsburgh. On the grassy area outside the entrance to the Arthur Kessler Building several ancient, bundled up women sat in wheelchairs, attended by younger women in hospital scrubs, likely from the Caribbean. Some of the women looked up as I passed by, perhaps thinking or hoping that I was a son, grandson, younger brother, or doctor come to visit them. As I looked away sympathy pains shot up my leg.

The Kessler Building housed residents that had retained some degree of mobility. The Reuben Sloan Hospital and Nursing Home loomed two hundred yards away down the tree-lined

path opposite the parking garage. For less able residents it was the point of no return. It was for my mother.

When I got to the front desk the receptionist handed me a clip board with a visitor's form. After I handed it back she asked me to wait. She spoke into her headset and a few minutes later a slender middle-aged woman with curly auburn hair that seemed to have a life of its own came over to the receptionist's desk. Her metal name tag said *Amanda Krauss, Director*. She had a sour smile on her face as she glanced at the clip board. "Mr. Millstein? Could you come with me, please?" I felt as if I were being summoned to the principal's office.

Inside, she settled in behind her desk and motioned for me to have a seat on the small beige sofa. A framed photo of a teenaged boy and a pre-teen girl with the same hair as Ms. Krauss sat on her desk next to a Carnegie Mellon coffee mug, filled with pens. She said, "So, I see you're Mr. Singer's nephew, correct?"

"Yes. Just wanted to stop by and say hi." I wondered why I was getting the third degree. "Would you like to see my license?"

"If you wouldn't mind. We can't be too careful when it comes to the safety of our residents. Especially with first-time out of town guests."

I handed my license to her. She stared at it, then at me. "You live in Denver?" She handed my license back. I noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"Ten years now."

"I see. And you've come in just to see Mr. Singer—Max?"

"Actually, I had my thirtieth reunion last night."

Ms. Kraus said, "Really. And how was it."

After ten minutes of strolling around the hotel function room, decorated with rolls of maroon and grey crepe paper streamers I realized the old popularity/snobbery grid was as rigid as ever. Thinking I would enjoy myself, or that people would have changed had been a naïve fantasy. As I walked from one alumni clump to the next the familiar high school detachment settled over me. It was comforting.

A couple of guys I'd been friendly with introduced me to their wives. When they asked me where my wife was I paused. I could have said that as we speak she was at Canyon Ranch in Lenox, Massachusetts, taking the integrative weight cure program so she could realize her "healthy weight," with her stay being paid for by her lover, my ex-boss. However, I kept it simple and replied that I was divorced. The wives said they were sorry. I wasn't. A woman named Rita Gerson, who'd been a bouncy majorette touched my forearm. She mentioned she was divorced, too, and that maybe we could have a drink later and talk. I could see a drink progressing to stupid sex. I declined. I wasn't feeling desperate enough to go through with it.

I shrugged. "Ms. Krauss, to tell you the truth I should have known better."

"My thirtieth is coming up next year. On the one hand I don't want to show up divorced and unattached. On the other, fuck 'em." She blushed. "Oops, that may have been inappropriate."

"No, no, I get it. Totally."

"Anyway." She put her glasses on her desk. "Were you, are you close to your uncle?"

"I was. I haven't seen him for years but he's always been my favorite. Look, I don't mean to be pushy but is there something wrong here?"

She folded her hands. "Maybe you can help us. There's a bit of a problem with your uncle. He's been keeping pigeons in his room."

“He what?”

“Come with me.”

Ms. Krauss and I paused in the doorway to Uncle Max’s room. He was lying in bed, wearing a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap. Red patches blotched his cheeks, like clown makeup. His hands, tucked over his sheet looked skeletal, like bird feet with claws. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open. A wheelchair was parked in the corner of the room with a black triangular flag extending upward like a whip antenna.

I knocked on the door. “Uncle Max?”

He didn’t respond. I looked at Ms. Krause. “He’s mostly deaf.” She tapped the small of my back, as if to say, go ahead, get closer.

I stood next to the bed. It smelled of pine sol with a hint of urine. “Uncle Max?”

He blinked and smiled. His teeth had a tobacco-stained color. He pushed up against the headboard. “Are you my new assistant?”

“Uncle Max, hi, it’s me. Michael. Mikey, Lillie’s boy. Remember?”

“What time is it?”

“It’s ten forty-five.”

“Christ, we have a show in fifteen minutes.”

Ms. Krause stood next to me. “Max has been putting on magic shows for the residents.”

Uncle Max pointed to Ms. Krause. “Where’s my money, bitch? You owe me for six shows.” He motioned for me to get closer. “Don’t just stand there. In the closet. Get my cape.”

The first time I saw Uncle Max do magic was after the annual two-hour Passover seder at my grandfather’s house. I was thirteen and I suppose I should have been focused on the story of

slavery and plagues and freedom but I was balancing a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* on my lap that my older cousin Marlene had slipped me earlier. I hoped my ultra-Orthodox grandfather thought my downcast, intense expression meant that I was feeling particularly affected by the plight of our enslaved ancestors. By third cup of wine on that unusually warm April day many of the younger grandsons were running around the house with their shirts off.

After jellied candies and sponge cake the aunts cleaned up, my grandfather lit a cigar, and uncles Al and Abe retreated to the living room and argued about things neither of them knew anything about—whether or not the Rosenbergs were really spies; how the Democrats were being controlled by the Communists; what was better, a Ford or a Chevy. The aunts told them to tone it down which only resulted in them turning it up.

Uncle Max signaled the grandchildren to follow him out to the back porch. He had us sit in a semi-circle simply by waving his hand in a circular motion. He put on his magician's hat, shaped like Shriner's cap with silver moons and stars and the show began. Somehow he made a Number Two pencil bend like it was wet spaghetti. He made a pen move across the table just by pointing at it. He pulled a silver dollar out of thin air, made it vanish and then he pulled it out of my Cousin Elaine's ear.

I said, "Uncle Max, could you make the Red Sea part, like God did?"

Before he could answer Aunt Rose came outside with his coat. "Max, we're leaving."

He rubbed my head. "Mikey, I'm working on it."

Sure enough there was a magician's cape in the closet and a black bag with what I guessed were his magic tricks. I said, "Uncle Max? Is this it?"

“Why do you keep calling me that? Go ahead, take the stuff to the auditorium.”

Ms. Krause said, “This way.”

At the end of the hallway opposite the cafeteria was a small stage. A dozen residents were waiting—some seated in chairs, some in wheelchairs. As Max hobbled up with his tripod cane they stared to applaud. He looked up at me. “Put the bag under the table. putz. Some assistant you are. Don’t you know anything? Help me on with my cape.”

As Uncle Max assembled his magic stuff one of the residents, a hunched over man in a powder blue velour track suit, wearing oversized tinted glasses that made his eyes look like marble eggs said, “Hey Maxie, let’s see you pull a rabbit out of your ass.” He reminded me of Georgie Pinkham from the reunion, the class asshole.

Max gave him the finger. Everyone laughed. Ms. Krauss said, “Let’s all be nice now.”

I couldn’t tell what stuff was in the black bag but like a good assistant I did what Max told me. I wondered where I should stand when one of the residents, a tiny woman with purple lipstick, a flowery dress, pearls, a pointy Halloween witch’s hat and a walker with tennis balls on bottoms of the back legs somehow vaulted up on stage next to Max. Her glasses were thick as glass ashtrays. She jabbed me in the chest with a stubby finger. “You go sit down now.”

Ms. Krauss leaned in to me. “That’s Pearl. She’s buried three husbands. She’s Max’s girlfriend. Well, she says she is. Max says someday he’s gonna make her vanish.”

Pearl clomped around the stage with surprising agility, setting up the magician’s table with a flourish. She lit tall candles on either side of the table. Every time she passed Max she brushed her hip against him, a bit lasciviously, I thought. I wondered if they were having sex. With Viagra all things are possible.

At precisely eleven Pearl, in a voice that reminded me of Betty Boop said, “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming and now, please give a nice round of applause for Magic Max.” Everyone clapped except the man in the powder blue suit, who flapped his lips like a horse. Pearl screamed, “Shut the hell up, Benny.”

Pearl pushed a button on a cassette player and Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty Waltz* began to play. The music reached an opening crescendo and then the familiar tune began. I found myself mouthing the words, *I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream*. Ms. Krauss caught my eye and smiled. On some impulse I took her hand.

To the oohs and laughter of the crowd, which had grown to at least fifteen residents Max proceeded to force a glass through the wood table, bend a spoon and then straighten it in Pearl’s hand, spin a playing card in mid-air, make a flame come out of his thumb..

Pearl curtsied, as if she were the one that had done the magic. “And now for something very special.”

Max turned his back to the audience, paused for a moment, turned around and somehow two white pigeons emerged from his hands. It brought a cheer from the audience. The pigeons perched as peacefully as doves on Max’s shoulders, and I had a vision of the doves flying Uncle Max up to heaven until Benny threw a spitball, hitting one of the birds, making both of them take off in noisy, frenzied flight. The residents ducked their heads as the terrified birds flapped over them and into the kitchen, where a man in a chef’s hat swung at them with a meat cleaver. Uncle Max shook his cane and shouted, “Don’t you touch my birds, you son of a bitch.”

Ms. Krauss dropped my hand ran to help a woman in a yellow sun dress who had fallen out of her wheelchair. She looked back at me. “Help us, Michael.”

Somehow, with the help of the kitchen staff we cornered the pigeons and covered them with a cardboard produce box. The box had holes, and I could see the stunned birds clinging together. I wondered how the hell Uncle Max had gotten hold of them.

Obviously the show was over. A nurse's aide helped Max return to his room. The chef stuck a toothpick in the side of his mouth. "I could roast these birds for dinner."

I said, "Shut up."

An hour later a volunteer from the Humane Society came the building to collect the birds. I went to Uncle Max's room to explain. He seemed indifferent. "I can always get more. Make yourself useful. Turn on the television."

I sat next to him and for half an hour we watched a soap opera. As I was about to leave I said, "Uncle Max, could you part the Red Sea like God did?"

He looked at me with a glimmer of recognition. "I'm working on it."

A month later I went with Amanda to her class reunion. We had one hell of a good time.