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The Prestige

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Extract

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I

It began on a train, heading north through England, although I was soon to discover that the story had really begun more than a hundred years earlier.

I had no sense of any of this at the time: I was on company time, following up a report of an incident at a religious sect. On my lap lay the bulky envelope I had received from my father that morning, still unopened, because when Dad phoned to tell me about it my mind had been elsewhere. A bedroom door slamming, my girlfriend in the middle of walking out on me. 'Yes, Dad,' I had said, as Zelda stormed past with a boxful of my compact discs. 'Drop it in the mail, and I'll have a look.'

After I read the morning's edition of the *Chronicle*, and bought a sandwich and a cup of instant coffee from the refreshment trolley, I opened Dad's envelope. A large-format paperback book slipped out, with a note loose inside and a used envelope folded in half.

The note said, 'Dear Andy, Here is the book I told you about. I think it was sent by the same woman who rang me. She asked me if I knew where you were. I'm enclosing the envelope the book arrived in. The postmark is a bit blurred, but maybe you can make it out. Your mother would love to know when you are coming to stay with us again. How about next weekend? With love, Dad.'

At last I remembered some of my father's phone call. He told me the book had arrived, and that the woman who had sent it appeared to be some kind of distant relative, because she had been talking about my family. I should have paid more attention to him.

Here, though, was the book. It was called *Secret Methods of Magic*, and the author was one Alfred Borden. To all appearances it was one of those instructional books of card

tricks, sleight of hand, illusions involving silk scarves, and so on. At first glance, most of what interested me about it was that although it was a recently published paperback, the text itself appeared to be a facsimile of a much older edition: the typography, the illustrations, the chapter headings and the laboured writing style all suggested this.

I couldn't see why I should be interested in such a book. Only the author's name was familiar: Borden was the name I had been born with, although when I was adopted my name was changed to that of my adoptive parents. My name now, my full and legal name, is Andrew Westley, and although I have always known that I was adopted I grew up thinking of Duncan and Jillian Westley as Dad and Mum, loved them as parents, and behaved as their son. All this is still true. I feel nothing for my natural parents. I'm not curious about them or why they put me up for adoption, and have no wish ever to trace them now that I am an adult. All that is in my distant past, and they have always felt irrelevant to me.

There is, though, one matter concerning my past that borders on the obsessive.

I am certain, or to be accurate almost certain, that I was born one of a pair of identical twins, and that my brother and I were separated at the time of adoption. I have no idea why this was done, nor where my brother might be now, but I have always assumed that he was adopted at the same time as me. I only started to suspect his existence when I was entering my teens. By chance I came across a passage in a book, an adventure story, that described the way in which many pairs of twins are linked by an inexplicable, apparently psychic contact. Even when separated by hundreds of miles or living in different countries, such twins will share feelings of pain, surprise, happiness, depression, one twin sending to the other, and vice versa. Reading this was one of those moments in life when suddenly a lot of things become clear.

All my life, as long as I can remember, I have had the feeling that *someone else* is sharing my life. As a child, I thought little of it and assumed everyone else had the same

feelings. As I grew older, and I realised none of my friends was going through the same thing, it became a mystery. Reading the book therefore came as a great relief as it seemed to explain everything. I had a twin somewhere.

The feeling of rapport is in some ways vague, a sense of being cared for, even watched over, but in others it is much more specific. The general feeling is of a constant background, while more direct 'messages' come only occasionally. These are acute and precise, even though the actual communication is invariably non-verbal.

Once or twice when I have been drunk, for example, I have felt my brother's consternation growing in me, a fear that I might come to some harm. On one of these occasions, when I was leaving a party late at night and was about to drive myself home, the flash of concern that reached me was so powerful I felt myself sobering up! I tried describing this at the time to the friends I was with, but they joked it away. Even so I drove home inexplicably sober that night. It must be a psychic mechanism of some kind, which we use without understanding it. No one to my knowledge has ever satisfactorily explained it, even though it is common and well documented between twins.

There is in my case, however, an extra mystery.

Not only have I never been able to trace my brother, as far as official records are concerned I never had a brother of any kind, let alone a twin. I do have intermittent memories of my life before adoption, although I was only three when that happened, and I can't remember having a brother at all. Dad and Mum knew nothing about it; they have told me that when they adopted me there was no suggestion of my having a brother.

As an adoptee you have certain legal rights. The most important of these is protection from your natural parents: they cannot contact you by any legal means. Another right is that when you reach adulthood you are able to ask about some of the circumstances surrounding your adoption. You can find out the names of your natural parents, for instance, and the address of the court where the adoption

was made, and therefore where relevant records can be examined.

I followed all this up soon after my eighteenth birthday, anxious to find out what I could about my background. The adoption agency referred me to Ealing County Court where the papers were kept, and here I discovered that I had been put up for adoption by my father, whose name was Clive Alexander Borden. My mother's name was Diana Ruth Borden (née Ellington), but she had died soon after I was born. I assumed that the adoption happened because of her death, but in fact I was not adopted for more than two years after she died, during which period my father brought me up by himself. My own original name was Nicholas Julius Borden. There was nothing about any other child, adopted or otherwise.

I later checked birth records at St Catherine's House in London, but these confirmed I was the Bordens' only child.

Even so, my psychic contacts with my twin remained through all this, and have continued ever since.

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The book had been published in the USA by Dover Publications, and was a handsome, well-made paperback. The cover painting depicted a dinner-jacketed stage magician pointing his hands expressively towards a wooden cabinet, from which a young lady was emerging. She was wearing a dazzling smile and a costume which for the period was probably considered saucy.

Under the author's name was printed: 'Edited and annotated by Lord Colderdale.'

At the bottom of the cover, in bold white lettering, was the blurb: 'The Famous Oath-Protected Book of Secrets'.

There was a longer and more descriptive blurb on the back cover:

Originally printed in London in 1905, by the specialist publishers Goodwin & Andrewson, this book was sold only to professional magicians who were prepared to swear an oath of secrecy about its contents. First edition copies are now exceedingly rare, and virtually impossible for general readers to obtain.

Made publicly available for the first time, this new edition is completely unabridged and contains all the original illustrations, as well as the notes and supplementary text provided by Britain's Earl of Colderdale, a noted contemporary *amateur* of magic.

The author is Alfred Borden, inventor of the legendary illusion THE NEW TRANSPORTED MAN. Borden, whose stage name was 'Le Professeur de Magie', was in the first decade of this century the leading stage illusionist. Encouraged in his early years by John Henry Anderson, and as a protégé of Nevil Maskelyne's, Borden was a contemporary of Houdini, David Devant, Chung Ling Soo and Buatier de Kolta. He was based in London, England, but frequently toured the United States and Europe.

While not strictly speaking an instruction manual, this book with its broad understanding of magical methods will give both laymen and professionals startling insights into the mind of one of the greatest magicians who ever lived.

It was amusing to discover that one of my ancestors had been a magician, but I had no special interest in the subject. I happen to find some kinds of conjuring tedious; card tricks, especially, but many others too. The illusions you sometimes see on television are impressive, but I have never felt curious about how the effects are in fact achieved. I remember someone once saying that the trouble with magic was that the more a magician protects his secrets, the more banal they turn out to be.

Alfred Borden's book contained a long section on card tricks, and another described tricks with cigarettes and coins. Explanatory drawings and instructions accompanied each one. At the back of the book was a chapter about stage

illusions, with many illustrations of cabinets with hidden compartments, boxes with false bottoms, tables with lifting devices concealed behind curtains, and other apparatus. I glanced through some of these pages.

The first half of the book was not illustrated, but consisted of a long account of the author's life and outlook on magic. It began with the following words:

'I write in the year 1901.

'My name, my real name, is Alfred Borden. The story of my life is the story of the secrets by which I have lived my life. They are described in this narrative for the first and last time; this is the only copy.

'I was born in 1856 on the eighth day of the month of May, in the seaside town of Hastings. I was a healthy, vigorous child. My father was a tradesman of that borough, a master wheelwright and cooper. Our house—'

I briefly imagined the writer of this book settling down to begin his memoir. For no exact reason I visualised him as a tall, dark-haired man, stern-faced and bearded, slightly hunched, wearing narrow reading glasses, working in a pool of light thrown by a solitary lamp placed next to his elbow. I imagined the rest of the household in a deferential silence, leaving the master in peace while he wrote. The reality was no doubt different, but stereotypes of our forebears are difficult to throw off.

I wondered what relation Alfred Borden was to me. If the line of descent was direct, in other words if he wasn't a cousin or an uncle, then he would be my great- or great-great-grandfather. If he was born in 1856, he would have been in his middle forties when he wrote the book; it seemed likely he was therefore not my father's father, but of an earlier generation.

The Introduction was written in much the same style as the main text, with several long explanations about how the book came into being. The book appeared to be based on Borden's private notebook, not intended for publication.

Colderdale had considerably expanded and clarified the narrative, and added the descriptions of most of the tricks. There was no extra biographical information about Borden, but presumably I would find some if I read the whole book.

I couldn't see how the book was going to tell me anything about my brother. He remained my only interest in my natural family.

At this point my mobile phone beeped. It was Sonja, the secretary of my editor, Len Wickham. I suspected at once that Len had got her to call me, to make sure I was on the train.

'Andy, there's been a change of plan about the car,' she said. 'Eric Lambert had to take it in for a repair to the brakes, so it's in a garage.'

She gave me the address. It was the availability of this car in Sheffield, a high-mileage Ford renowned for frequent breakdowns, that prevented me from driving up in my own car. Len wouldn't authorise the expenses if a company car was on hand.

'Did Uncle say anything else?' I said.

'Such as?'

'This story's still on?'

'Yes.'

'Has anything else come in from the agencies?'

'We've had a faxed confirmation from the State Penitentiary in California. Franklin is still a prisoner.'

'All right.'

We hung up. While I was still holding the phone I keyed in my parents' number, and spoke to my father. I told him I was on my way to Sheffield, would be driving from there into the Peak District and if it was OK with them (of course it would be) I could come and stay the night. My father sounded pleased. He and Jillian still lived in Wilmslow, Cheshire, and now I was working in London my trips to see them were infrequent.

I told him I had received the book.

'Have you any idea why it was sent to you?' he said.

'Not the faintest.'

'Are you going to read it?'

'It's not my sort of thing. I've already looked through it. Maybe I'll have another look later.'

'Andy, I noticed it was written by someone called Borden.'

'Yes. Did she say anything about that?'

'No. I don't think so.'

After we had hung up I put the book in my case and stared through the train window at the passing countryside. The sky was grey, and rain was streaking the glass. I tried to think about the incident I was being sent to investigate. I worked for the *Chronicle*, specifically as a general features writer, a label which was grander than the reality. The true state of affairs was that Dad was himself a newspaperman, and had formerly worked for the Manchester *Evening Post*, a sister paper to the *Chronicle*. It was a matter of pride to him that I had obtained the job, even though I have always suspected him of pulling strings for me. I am not a fluent journalist, and have not done well in the training programme I have been taking. One of my serious long-term worries is that one day I am going to have to explain to my father why I have quit what he considers to be a prestigious job on the greatest British newspaper.

In the meantime, I struggle unwillingly on. Covering the incident I was travelling to was partly the consequence of another story I had filed several months earlier, about a group of UFO enthusiasts. Since then Len Wickham, my supervising editor, had assigned me to any story that involved witches' covens, levitation, spontaneous combustion, crop circles, and other fringe subjects. I had already discovered that in most cases, once you went into these things properly, there was not much to say about them, and remarkably few of the stories I filed were ever printed. Even so, Wickham continued to send me to cover them.

There was an extra twist this time. With some relish, Wickham informed me that someone from the sect had phoned to ask if the *Chronicle* was planning to cover the story, and if so had asked for me in person. They had seen

some of my earlier articles, thought I showed the right degree of honest scepticism, and could therefore be relied on for a forthright article. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, it seemed likely to prove yet another dud.

A Californian religious sect called the Rapturous Church of Christ Jesus had established a community in a large country house in a Derbyshire village. One of the women members had died of natural causes a few days earlier. Her GP was present, as was her daughter. As she lay paralysed, on the point of death, a man had entered the room. He stood beside the bed and made soothing gestures with his hands. The woman died soon after, and the man immediately left the room without speaking to the other two. He was not seen afterwards. However, he had been recognised by the woman's daughter, and by two members of the sect who had come into the room while he was there, as the founder of the sect. This was Father Patrick Franklin, and the sect had grown up around him because of his claimed ability to bilocate.

The incident was newsworthy for two reasons. It was the first of Franklin's bilocations to have been witnessed by non-members of the sect, one of whom happened to be a professional woman with a local reputation. And the other reason was that Franklin's whereabouts on the day in question could be firmly established: he was known to be an inmate of the California State Penitentiary, and as Sonja had just confirmed to me on the phone he was still there.

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The community was established on the outskirts of the Peak District village of Caldlow, once a centre of slate mining, now heavily dependent on day trippers. There was a National Trust shop in the centre of the village, a pony trekking club, several gift shops and an hotel. As I drove

through, the chill rain was drizzling through the valley, obscuring the rocky heights on each side.

I stopped in the village for a cup of tea, thinking I might talk to some of the locals about the Rapturous Church, but apart from me the café was empty, and the woman who worked behind the counter said she drove in daily from Chesterfield.

While I was sitting there, wondering whether to take the opportunity to grab some lunch before going on, my brother unexpectedly made contact with me. The sensation was so distinct, so urgent, that I turned my head in surprise, thinking for a moment that someone in the room had addressed me. I closed my eyes, lowered my face, and listened for more.

No words. Nothing explicit. Nothing I could answer or write down or even put into words for myself. But it amounted to anticipation, happiness, excitement, pleasure, encouragement.

I tried to send back: what is this for? Why was I being welcomed? What are you encouraging me to do? Is it something about this religious community?

I waited, knowing that these experiences never took the form of a dialogue, so that raising questions would not receive any kind of answer, but I was hoping another signal would come from him. I tried to reach out mentally to him, thinking perhaps his contact with me was a way of getting me to communicate with him, but in this sense I could feel nothing of him there.

My expression must have revealed something of my churned-up inner feelings, because the woman behind the counter was staring at me curiously. I swallowed the rest of my tea, returned the cup and saucer to the counter, smiled politely, then hurried out to the car. As I sat down and slammed the door, a second message came from my brother. It was the same as the first, a direct urging of me to arrive, to be there with him. It was still impossible to put it into words.

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The entrance to the Rapturous Church was a steep driveway slanting off the main road, but barred by a pair of wrought iron gates and a gatehouse. There was a second gate to one side, also closed, marked Private. The two entrances formed an extra space, so I parked my car there and walked across to the gatehouse. Inside the wooden porch a modern bell push had been attached to the wall, and beneath this was a printed notice:

RAPTUROUS CHURCH OF CHRIST JESUS WELCOMES YOU
NO VISITORS WITHOUT APPOINTMENT
FOR APPOINTMENTS RING CALDLOW 393960
TRADESMEN AND OTHERS PRESS BELL TWICE
JESUS LOVES YOU

I pressed the bell twice, without audible effect.

Some leaflets were standing in a semi-enclosed holder, and beneath them was a padlocked metal box with a coin slot in the top, screwed firmly to the wall. I took one of the leaflets, slipped a fifty-pence piece into the box, then went back to the car and rested my backside against the nearside wing while I read it. The front page was a brief history of the sect, and carried a photograph of Father Franklin. The remaining three pages had a selection of Biblical quotes.

When I next looked towards the gates I discovered they were opening silently from some remote command, so I climbed back into the car and took it up the sloping, gravelled drive. This curved as it went up the hill, with a lawn rising in a shallow convex on one side. Ornamental trees and shrubs had been planted at intervals, drooping in the veils of misty rain. On the lower side were thick clumps of dark-leafed rhododendron bushes. In the rear-view mirror I noticed the gates closing behind me as I drove out of sight of them. The main house soon came into view: it was a huge and unattractive building of four or five main storeys,

with black slate roofs and solid-looking walls of sombre dark-brown brick and stone. The windows were tall and narrow, and blankly reflected the rain-laden sky. The place gave me a cold, grim feeling, yet even as I drove towards the part of the drive made over as a car park I felt my brother's presence in me once again, urging me on.

I saw a VISITORS THIS WAY sign, and followed it along a gravel path against the main wall of the house, dodging the drips from the thickly growing ivy. I pushed open a door and went into a narrow hallway, one that smelt of ancient wood and dust, reminding me of the Lower Corridor in the school I had been to. This building had the same institutional feeling, but unlike my school was steeped in silence.

I saw a door marked Reception, and knocked. When there was no answer I put my head around the door, but the room was empty. There were two old-looking metal desks, on one of which was perched a computer.

Hearing footsteps I returned to the hallway, and a few moments later a thin middle-aged woman appeared at the turn of the stairs. She was carrying several envelope wallet files. Her feet made a loud sound on the uncarpeted wooden steps, and she looked enquiringly at me when she saw me there.

'I'm looking for Mrs Holloway,' I said. 'Are you she?'

'Yes, I am. How may I help you?'

There was no trace of the American accent I had half-expected.

'My name is Andrew Westley, and I'm from the *Chronicle*.' I showed her my press card, but she hardly glanced at it. 'I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about Father Franklin.'

'Father Franklin is in California at present.'

'So I believe, but there was the incident last week—'

'Which incident do you mean?' said Mrs Holloway.

'I understand Father Franklin was seen here. At this house.'

She shook her head slowly. She was standing with her back to the door which led into her office. 'I think you must be making a mistake, Mr Westley.'

'Did you see Father Franklin when he was here?' I said.

'I did not. Nor was he here.' She was starting to stonewall me, which was the last thing I had expected. 'Have you been in touch with our Press Office?'

'Are they here?'

'We have an office in London. All press interviews are arranged through them.'

'I was told to come here.'

'By our Press Officer?'

'No . . . I understood a request was sent to the *Chronicle*, after Father Franklin made an appearance. Are you denying that that happened?'

'Do you mean the sending of the request? No one here has been in contact with your newspaper. If you mean am I denying the appearance of Father Franklin, the answer is yes.'

We stared at each other. I was torn between irritation with her and frustration at myself. Whenever incidents like this did not go smoothly, I blamed my lack of experience and motivation. The other writers on the paper always seemed to know how to handle people like Mrs Holloway.

'Can I see whoever is in charge here?' I said.

'I am the head of administration. Everyone else is involved with the teaching.'

I was about to give up, but I said, 'Does my name mean anything at all to you?'

'Should it?'

'Someone requested me by name.'

'That would have come from the Press Office, not from here.'

'Hold on,' I said.

I walked back to the car to collect the notes I had been given by Wickham the day before. I stood for a moment by the door of the car, in the light rain, staring at the puddled ground. Mrs Holloway was still standing by the bottom of the stairs when I returned, but she had put down her bundle of files somewhere.

I stood beside her while I turned to the page Wickham

had been sent. It was a fax message. It said, 'To Mr L. Wickham, Features Editor, *Chronicle*. The necessary written details you requested are as follows: Rapturous Church of Christ Jesus, Caldlow, Derbyshire. Half a mile outside Caldlow village, to the north, on A623. Parking at main gate, or in the grounds. Mrs Holloway, administrator, will provide your reporter Mr Andrew Westley with information. K. Angier.'

'This is nothing to do with us,' Mrs Holloway said when she had read it. 'I'm sorry.'

'Who is K. Angier?' I said. 'Mr? Mrs?'

'*She* is the resident of the private wing on the east side of this building, and has no connection with the Church. Thank you.'

She had placed her hand on my elbow and was propelling me politely towards the door. She indicated that the continuation of the gravel path would take me to a gate, where the entrance to the private wing would be found.

I said, 'I'm sorry if there's been a misunderstanding. I don't know how it happened.'

'If you want any more information about the Church, I'd be grateful if you'd speak to the Press Office. That is its function, you know.'

'Yes, all right.' It was raining more heavily now, and I had brought no coat. I said, 'May I ask you just one thing? Is everybody away at present?'

'No, we have full attendance. There are more than two hundred people in training this week.'

'It feels as if the whole place is empty.'

'We are a group whose rapture is silent. I am the only person permitted to speak during the hours of daylight. Good day to you.'

She retreated into the building.