

For the Love of a Street Magician

By David Himmel

Illustration by Danielle Taylor

I had been locked down in the longest, harshest and most unforgiving Chicago winter on record. Experts called it the Polar Vortex. I called it goddamn miserable.

I was never one to complain about the weather, but that winter came early and strong and by the end of January, I was ready to get out of there. Though I stayed because of my crippling commitment to my daily toils of a career in digital marketing. I'm just no good at pulling my head out of brand-centric code in order to plan and book a vacation. Really, it's the idea of spending money that keeps me chained to responsibility. I hate doing it. You see, once I spend the money, I no longer have that money to spend. It's an issue that my therapist says is less about my approach to personal finances and more about my struggle to be "present in my own life." Those are the words she uses, anyway.

Then it snowed the second week of April and the streets were riddled with potholes so big, there was talk that Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 was lost deep within one of them. I Googled "South Florida Beaches" and Lido Key came up in the search. I booked a flight, a Mustang convertible and a hotel room. I left on the first of May — the coldest start to May that Chicago had seen in 75 years.

The sunrays hit my face like a cop's flashlight during a nighttime traffic stop. I winced. I wasn't used to that sort of brightness, or even that sort of heat. It had been too long since I'd been warm. The automatic sliding doors of the Sarasota-Bradenton Airport whooshed closed behind me. I walked to retrieve my rental car letting my skin soak up every drop of vitamin D it could.

With my silver Mustang convertible's top down, I headed straight to the Lido Beach Resort. I needed a dip in the ocean, sunburn and a beer. ASAP.

I was committed to the beach just beyond my room's window where I worked on what you might call a base tan. For me, it's a base burn. My parents and two brothers have olive complexions and tan with ease. I lack that trait acquired long ago from our desert-roaming Jewish ancestors. My complexion is more that of a redheaded Irish Catholic than of a brown-haired Ashkenazi Jew. I caught up on some reading: a few chapters of *Drop Dead Healthy* by A.J. Jacobs and a small stack of *Time* magazines filled with old news. At night, I'd ask the guy at the front desk for a dinner and entertainment recommendation. I'd make small talk with the bartender or patrons at the restaurants and bars, and before my buzz was too strong, I'd drive back to the hotel and pass out with the TV on. It was turning into the perfect week. I was warm and I was being present in my own life.

Most people I tell this to think I'm strange for saying so, but I quite enjoy dining alone. I like doing a lot of things alone. It gives me time to think, you know, be introspective — work on some of the tasks my therapist keeps giving me. It also lets me watch strangers be strange. I find that observing others helps me to better observe myself. It's like an anthropology course in real time.

Following another successful day of burning, reading and relaxing, my guy at the front desk recommended Café L'Europe.

"Good evening. What can I get you?" asked the bartender as he stylishly flicked a coaster my way.

"I'll have a Stella," I said. He reached for one of those branded Stella Artois chalice. "No need to dirty that. It already comes in a glass."

I nursed my beer while perusing the menu and other patrons. A young woman bogarted my attention. She was beautiful with long brown hair and big eyes. She wore dark jeans and a warm-weather-friendly white top. I watched her as she walked on high heels from what I assumed was the women's restroom to her table. A man was there with his back to me.

One of the tricks to being alone and watching strangers is to not come across as creepy. I was not doing a good job of this. There was something familiar about this woman and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I had seen her before, but where and when? I didn't know anyone in Florida, so the chances of me running into an old high school or college friend were unlikely.

I finished the first beer, ordered another one and dinner, and went back to watching the woman. I collected her dining and conversational mannerisms and ran them through my memory database in search of a match. I wondered if she was one of the forgotten women I bedded during a righteous sexual bender in my mid-twenties. If so, it was better to leave her in my brain's dustbin. Besides, she was with someone, so the chance of me picking her up, bringing her back to my hotel on the beach in my rented convertible and screwing her was not going to happen.

But then it hit me.

Her name was Brittney Ford. Brittney used to be my baby brother Jay's girlfriend. I hadn't seen her, or my brother, in three years, which is why I didn't recognize her. Back then; she was a scrappy-looking kid with much shorter hair and a constant scowl on her face because she and Jay were almost always in some vicious lovers' quarrel.

I immediately diverted my eyes to the bottom of my beer bottle. Then I wondered if that was my brother at her table. It wasn't possible. There's no way they were still together. No two people could have survived that sort of volatile dysfunction. I slowly turned back to get another quick look at Brittney and her date. The man with the brown hair turned his head to speak to the waitress and sure as shit, it was Jay.

My eyes shot right back. I stared into my drink and wanted nothing more than to crawl inside of the bottle to hide — let the bartender throw me into the trash and be carried away unnoticed by my long-lost kin.

Three years ago, Jay and Brittney disappeared into the ether after a chair-smashing fight between him, me and our other brother, Andrew, at our grandmother's 90th birthday party. It wasn't my proudest moment, but it was a moment that had been brewing for a while. After Jay smashed the country club's dining room chair over my back, he announced that he hated his family and never wanted to see us again. Andrew laughed through a split and bloodied lip and said, "OK, Kevin McCallister," a reference to a Macaulay Culkin line in *Home Alone*. Jay grabbed Brittney's hand and stormed out.

Jay never returned phone calls, e-mails or text messages. Neither



did Brittney. My mom contacted Brittney's parents, but they didn't have much information either, although they were pretty certain that Brittney and Jay were not together. An ambiguous e-mail from her a few months after the vanishing led them to believe she was living in a commune in Austin, Texas. All efforts to contact my brother were futile. Our grandmother, cousins, aunts, uncles and friends all did their best to reach out, too. Jay even unfriended us on Facebook.

Through various grapevines and Google searches, we could vaguely keep my brother's whereabouts and wellbeing known. At one point, he moved to L.A. Jay had always wanted to be an actor, though he'd never taken a single acting class in his life or attended one audition. There was a rumor he was living on a ranch in Jackson Hole, Wyoming for a bit. Just a few months before my trip to Florida, my father swore he saw Jay on the L train in downtown Chicago.

While the rest of the family wanted Andrew and I just to apologize, we felt that doing so would have further enabled Jay to act like the selfish, entitled prick he was. That, right there, was the core of our tension. While I was buried in my chosen responsibilities, Jay wanted all the accoutrements of a life well earned without any of the accountability or work to show for it. Andrew was stuck between the opposite poles of me and Jay, though as he got older, he started appreciating my point of view. Things were often tense, but Jay's disappearing act had put even greater strain on our family, and after a year and a few dozen therapy sessions, I put my anger behind me. I called him on his birthdays and sent him an e-mail at Thanksgivings. Total radio silence.

The bartender brought me my meal, the surf and turf, but I couldn't touch it. The anxiety of knowing my brother and I were in the same room after all of this time had knotted up my stomach and hoisted it into my throat. I kept my head down and asked the bartender for my bill. I had to get out of there.

"Brian? Brian Wolff? Is that really you?"

Brittney had noticed me as she made her way from what I still assumed was the ladies' room. I kept my head down hoping she would keep walking. She leaned in and stuck her face between my food and mine. I looked up. "Brian!" she said.

"Oh, Brittney. Hey. What are you doing here?"

"We live here now," she said, hugging me.

"How about that," I said. "What're you up to these days?"

"I'm still teaching."

"That's great. You said 'we' live here. So you have a family now? Married and all that."

"Not married, but we're talking about it. We're always talking about it."

"Boyfriend dragging his feet, eh?"

"You know how Jay is."

Yep, it was confirmed. "Oh, sure. Of course. That's Jay."

"He's right over here." She pointed to her table then pulled my hand.

"Come over. Bring your food. We just finished but we should have a drink and catch up. Bartender! Send this man's check to our table."

As Brittney led me to the table, I said, "Really? You think it's a good idea? The last time we were in a public dining room together it didn't go so well."

"Oh, that's ancient history. Come on."

Jay looked at me with what must have been honest to goodness disbelief because he said, "Holy Jesus... I don't believe it. Brian." We hugged. Jay was a grown man and slightly taller than me, yet, in my arms, he felt like that little kid I grew up with. I sat down and the waitress asked if we needed anything else. We all ordered another drink. I still couldn't touch my food.

"You look good," I told him.

"You, too," he said.

"What are you doing down here?"

"Brittney's teaching--"

"I know that," I interrupted. "What are you doing?"

"I'm a street magician."

"A what?"

"A street magician, Brian. I perform street magic."

"So, you're not acting anymore?"

"I'm still performing."

"Not the same thing."

"Acting. Magic. It's all the art of performance."

"OK. So, where do you perform?"

"All over. Was here in St. Armands today."

"We come here a lot," Brittney said. "He's getting a nice following. We're hoping that he'll get nominated for the Circus Ring of Fame."

"The what?"

"It's like the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but for circus performers," she said.

"Have you performed in a circus, Jay?" I asked. The waitress delivered our drinks.

"No. But it's really for all performers."

"How about that." I took a long swig of my Stella and set the bottle down next to the empty Stella chalice. Jay stirred his bourbon and ginger with the red cocktail straw then bent it over the rim of the glass and held it that way with his finger rather than take the damn thing out. He took a drink, leaving almost nothing but the ice.

"What about you?" he asked. "What are you doing down here?"

"Came down for a little R 'n R, as they say."

"Where you staying?" he asked.

"Lido Beach Resort."

"You should come watch him perform tomorrow," Brittney said with the same enthusiasm as a coked-up high school cheerleader. "We'll show you around, show you our place. It's cute."

"Sure, I don't have anything else on the docket for tomorrow." That was a lie. I was hoping to be done with Drop Dead Healthy before heading home and was only about 100 pages from finishing it. But I didn't want to be rude and I was curious about their life. It was surprising how bubbly and friendly Brittney was. This woman was a far cry from the one I used to know. "How about we meet at your place in the morning, say, ten? You can take me to your favorite Saturday brunch spot."

"Better. We'll make breakfast," said Brittney. She was so excited. I started to wonder if she was, in fact, on coke. That would explain the multiple trips to the bathroom.

We finished our drinks, hugged goodnight and went our separate ways. I drove a while along the coast with the top down, the wind in my hair and all that clichéd crap. My head hit the pillow a little after 1 a.m. I had a terrible time sleeping.

They lived in Gillespie Park, which Brittney explained to me as the best place in Sarasota for artists and actors. I asked her about performers and she laughed. Jay didn't hear my passive-aggressive dig because he was in the kitchen trying to make eggs and French toast.

"What was it that Grandma used in her French toast to make it so good?" he called out to me.

"Cinnamon and sugar," I shouted back from the couch in their living room. I heard Jay grumble something about not having any cinnamon or sugar.

Their place looked like they won a complete home furnishing from Target through some sweepstakes. On the wall above the couch were decals of cursive lettering that read, "Live, Laugh, Love." There

was similar décor on the wall above their bed: Those read, “Always kiss me goodnight.” For two people living in an artist’s neighborhood, they didn’t seem to have a clue what artistry was. That apartment was what homogenized gentrification looks like.

Jay served breakfast. He apologized for not making the French toast as well as Grandma and I could sense his level of fury. But the French toast was fine. When is it not? Scrambled eggs, rye toast, turkey bacon and orange juice with loads of pulp — a weekend breakfast just like Mom used to make. I considered calling our parents and Andrew, but decided it was best to enjoy breakfast without bringing in the rest of the family and potentially sparking a fight. That was me consciously living in the present.

We drove back in two separate cars to St. Armands where Jay was set to perform. Brittney was meeting her girlfriends for shopping and lunch and would catch up with us later. Jay rode with me in the convertible.

“That’s a nice place,” I said over the rushing wind and the blaring radio.

“Thanks. I can’t stand those quotes on our walls.”

“I’m glad you said it.”

“But Brittney loves ‘em.”

“Do you always kiss her goodnight?”

“Probably. Turn left up here.”

“Do you get paid for this street magic?”

“Tips. And I’ve got cards that I pass out. I’ve booked a few gigs. Corporate parties and things like that.”

“Do you have a website? How are you marketing yourself?”

“I’m thinking about making some YouTube videos.”

“So, what’s the end game?”

“To be a professional magician, which I am.”

“Sort of.”

“No, I am. This is what I do. This is my job.”

“But you’re not getting paid. Not regularly anyway. Have you thought about getting an agent?”

“That’s not going to help.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t afford an agent until I’m actually making more money.”

“If you’re a professional, an agent is a cost of business.”

“I’m not making enough yet, Brian.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have to pay an agent unless the agent actually gets you bookings, Jay. So really, it’s not a major expense. You only pay if you get paid.”

“Yeah, but how much do I have to pay them?”

“I don’t know, ten, fifteen percent? Look into it. And get a website. I mean, if you’re going to do this, then do it.”

“It’s not like that.” He was getting angry with me. And I was getting angry with him. The conversation could have escalated to a fistfight with the car careening off the bridge and into Sarasota Bay, but we had arrived at St. Armands.

Jay carried with him a magic suitcase. Not a magical suitcase, but a briefcase for all of his magic materials. With the magic suitcase in hand, white Chuck Taylors on his feet, wearing jeans and a white v-neck t-shirt under a black tuxedo jacket with the sleeves rolled up, Jay Wolff looked like the real deal. He set his suitcase down a few yards outside of a bustling coffee shop and opened it. He removed a few coins, a couple decks of cards and a black Sharpie, and placed them in various pockets of his jeans and tuxedo jacket. Then he propped up a small, tented cardboard sign that read, “Jay Wolff — Magic!”

I’d known my brother Jay for 27 years — well, 24 if you subtract the three where we didn’t speak — and watching him perform was like watching a total stranger. He was calm, confident, funny, charming and my god was he good. Magicians don’t have mystical powers. Their tricks are

practiced over and over again. Pulling one off is a matter of skill. Those big Las Vegas Strip magic shows are all smoke and mirrors. With the audience and the act separated by a stage and rows of seats, turning a helicopter into a sexy tiger or majestic woman is a cinch. But having a complete stranger write her name on a seven of clubs from a freshly opened pack of Bicycle playing cards, have Jay rip it into several pieces, place it into his jacket pocket only to have the woman pull the signed card — in one piece, mind you — from her own purse, well, that’s impressive.

After every trick, people would demand, “Do it again!” He wouldn’t. Instead, he’d wow them with something entirely different. Crowds gathered. At one point, there were maybe 20 weekend shoppers and diners around him as he made a card float from a volunteer’s hand back to his, then tied his shoe into a perfect bow just by shaking his foot sporadically.

Applause. Tips. “Do it again!” I took a moment from my brother’s show to consider myself. I was smiling. I was proud. I was unimaginably proud of my baby brother. After a few hours out there, Jay had managed to collect around 300 bucks in tips. He gave out business cards and some recipients even said they’d love to hire him. They asked if he had a website. He told them he was making videos on YouTube.

“Well, you know I didn’t have a lot of friends growing up. So it was just something I started doing to kill the time.” Jay said to me over drinks at Lido Key Tiki Bar later on that day.

“I had no idea,” I said.

“I guess you already left for college when I really got into it.”

“Why didn’t you stay in L.A. and pursue this in Hollywood? Isn’t that a better venue for it? I mean, hell, you’re only a few hours from Vegas.”

“I don’t want to be a Vegas magician. My style is up close and personal.”

“I know, but there’s a market for that there.”

“We came here because of Brittney’s job. She’s the breadwinner, so, you know...”

“I’m surprised you guys are still together.”

“Why?”

“Because you two were always screaming at each other.”

“Relationships are hard work.”

“Didn’t she routinely scratch you bloody?”

“It’s not like that anymore.”

“Well, you seem happy now. When did you move here?”

“About a year ago.”

“Did you ever live in Jackson Hole?”

“Where?”

“Never mind.”

“It’s funny,” he said. “I’m impressed we haven’t killed each other yet. The last time we were together, it didn’t go so well.”

“It did not. Speaking of... I’m sorry it went down like that. Andrew and I... We love you, you know? You’re our brother...” I should have stopped there. “But, man, you were just such a prick about everything.”

“I wasn’t the prick. You started the fight.”

“I’m not talking about the fight. I’m talking about everything else. Everything that led to the fight. Like a decade of you flipping out over nothing and playing the victim and punching holes in walls screaming at Mom and Dad when your computer crashed.”

“Oh, God! That was one time. One!”

“The computer, yeah. But remember when you got a ticket two days after you got your license for speeding and you demanded Dad pay for it because it was his car and his fault that the gas pedal was — what did you call it — loose? You realize how insane that is.”

“Well, he should have told me about that.”

“Jay! You had your diver’s license. You had driven that car before. It couldn’t have been a surprise — no. There’s no way you can blame

speeding on a loose gas pedal. Besides, so what? It was a speeding ticket. It's a rite of passage."

"Well, what about the time you got drunk at cousin Liz's wedding and jumped out of the car on the way home and tried to get into the cab next to us at the stop light?"

"What about it?"

"That was stupid. And Dad drove off and left you."

"So what? It didn't hurt anyone. I was the idiot stuck having to find a cab home. We're not talking about me. We're talking about how you manipulate and abuse the people in our family. We're talking about how you stormed out of our grandmother's 90th birthday after smashing a chair across my back screaming obscenities then ignoring everyone for three years! And for what? It sure wasn't so you could run off and find yourself, discover inner peace and grow up at all. Look at yourself. You're half-assing it as a magician in Florida while your girlfriend supports you on a teacher's salary."

"I make money doing this! I am not half-assing it."

"Jay, you need to get a plan together. You're good. I mean it, you're really, really good. But you're almost 30 years old. It's time to take some responsibility and stop expecting everyone to just give you whatever it is you think you deserve. It's time to own your own life."

I sounded like my therapist. But I wasn't using my calming voice. I was being loud and I was pointing my finger in his face a lot. Then he was pointing his finger in my face.

"You don't know what you're talking about. You never listen," he shouted.

The short, baby faced bartender looked at us nervously. "Are you guys OK over here?"

"We're fine!" we barked.

"Of course I care, you idiot. That's why I'm telling you all this. And just what would you have liked me to listen to? All you ever do is yell at people."

"All you're doing is yelling at me!"

"Shut up," I said as I turned away and took a drink of my beer.

"No, you shut up."

I didn't look at him. "Shut up, Jay."

"What are you going to do, Brian? Huh? You gonna try and beat me up again? It didn't work so well for you last time."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I tried imagining myself lying on the beach under a blanket of sunshine, the sound of the ocean kissing the shore, my book resting on my chest as I slowly drifted to sleep. Then I heard my therapist's voice say, "Be present in your own life."

"You're a real ass—" Before he could finish the word, I became present. I sucker-punched him across the face. He fell off of his barstool. I kicked mine away. "You sonofa—"

I cut him off again as I lunged at him punching the side of his head, which probably hurt me more than it hurt him. He socked me in the gut. I put a knee to his hip and headbutted him, splitting open his lip. He spit the blood at me staining the white linen shirt I purchased specially for this trip. We were on the ground, rolling around kicking and punching each other. I heard the bartender ask us to stop fighting or she would call security.

I managed to get on top of Jay and pin his arms under my knees. When we were kids, we would wrestle for fun and this was a position I was quickly able to get either one of my brothers into before securing my win with a typewriter — tapping my fingers hard on their chestplates like I was clicking a keyboard then saying, "Ding!" and lightly slapping their faces as if hitting the carriage return lever until they admitted defeat.

But instead of giving Jay the typewriter, I punched his face. A right, a left... I could see his bruises forming. When he stopped fighting to get out from underneath me as much, I stood up and grabbed one of the chairs

from a table we'd fallen into. Jay was pulling himself up as I raised the chair above my head and said, "This is for ruining Grandma's birthday."

Then I felt a terrible sting. I dropped the chair and fell to my knees. There was a splintered chair leg in front of me. It wasn't from mine. Someone had just smashed a different chair across my back. Brittney had arrived at the bar.

"Stay down, Brian, or I'll get another one," she said.

I felt a small amount of blood run down the left side of my face. Jay stood up and Brittney took him in her arms. Two security guards rushed over.

"Just a fight between brothers," said Brittney. "We're leaving."

"Who's going to clean up this mess?" one of the guards asked.

I stood up, walked to the bar, grabbed a handful of cocktail napkins and wiped the blood from my face. Then I pulled out my credit card and waived it in the air. "I will." I looked at Jay. He looked pretty bad. I felt worse. He and Brittney walked out. One of the guards warned them not to come back. I was ushered into the security office where my photo was taken, personal information collected and credit card billed for \$500. One of the guards gave me a wad of gauze for my head and they sent me on my way with the directive to never return.

That following Thanksgiving, Jay came home. We hugged for proper etiquette, again, but mostly kept our distance. He and Andrew got along just fine. Jay told us that he would be moving back to Chicago. Florida, while he loved it, was no longer working out. Brittney had been arrested for possession and use of cocaine on school property. Not only was she a massive cokehead, but she had been dealing to several of the parents, raking in thousands of dollars a week. Jay said he had no idea. She would be staying in Florida pending trial. They'd be doing the long-distance thing.

Without Brittney's income, Jay was high and dry. Unable to make a livable wage on street magic alone, my 27-year-old baby brother had come crawling back home to the loving and enabling arms of our mom and dad.

Before the evening ended, Jay approached me. "Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"So... you think you can help me get a website set up?"

"Of course. I'll charge you my Friends & Family Freelance Rate."

"Wait, so I have to pay for it?"

"I have to do the work, yeah."

"How much will it really cost me?"

I started to feel bad for the kid. He had nothing. And I supposed it took a lot of nerve to ask me for help. In a way, it was like he was admitting I'd been right all along. But that kind of thinking was not me being at my most present. Still, it was enough reason for me to waive any monetary payment.

"You know what, since you're a start up, I'll give you the Special Friends & Family Rate."

"How much?"

I told him that payment was a promise to never smash a chair, or allow a chair to be smashed across my back again. He laughed, which I don't think counts as a verbal agreement.

At the very least, with my brother back home, I know now that it's safe to visit Florida again. 📍



David Himmel is an author, playwright and editor. His book, *A Camp Story* (The History Press, 2012) is worth the read and his plays have been funny and performed on a few serious stages. He is the head writer of the web series *Greetings! From Prison*. David lives in Chicago with a dog named Eddie and a girlfriend named Katie. Himmelink.com.