

Balthazar
Fabuloso

IN THE LAIR

— OF THE —

HUMBUGS

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I.J. Brindle

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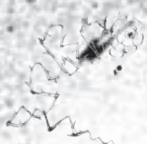
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For Theo, who followed the road before it was a road,
for Daniel, for unconditional everything,
and for Nic, who bangs into walls better than
anyone I know

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Log # 366

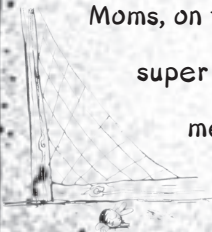
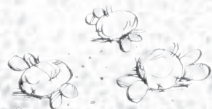
Today is the day we destroy our latest archenemies: the Fabulous Fabulosos, a troupe of sequined, feel-good suburban dinner-theater hacks. So in regard to my question of the other day (Can we sink any lower?), the answer is, sadly, yes. My only consolation is that the Fabulosos are one of those super annoying, lovey-dovey “functional” families that totally deserve what we have planned for them and worse.

The worst is this boy, Balthazar (real name, I kid you not), who looks super uncomfortable on their website and has nothing to say for himself except that he’s “a normal kid.” Normal? What kind of weirdo brags about being “normal”? This is the type of mighty adversary we pit ourselves against these days. *Sigh*

Even Humphrey is depressed and has gone off his flies. In solidarity, I am also now on hunger strike—which of course has stupid Blake going off on all sorts of cracks about eating disorders.

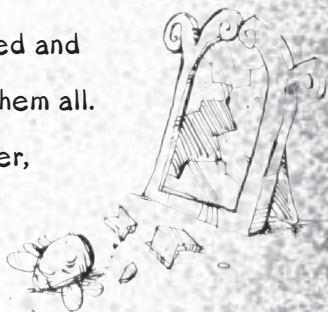


Moms, on the other hand, who is obsessed with dieting, is super encouraging—so long as I don’t mention anything about it to my social worker.



Anyway, we were supposed to leave for the Magic Mansion Dinner Theater five minutes ago to watch the Fabulosos' brunch matinee as well as the end of their professional lives, only Moms and Dad are having another one of their "differences of opinion." Already their screams have broken the bathroom mirror and set off the fire alarm. Will we even make the show? Who knows? Who cares?

You see one family humiliated, crushed and driven out of the business, you've seen them all. The thrill is gone. I feel like my life is over, and I'm only twelve. Is that normal? Hah! The only normal people are the ones you don't know yet.



Whatever,
Pagan Fistula

1. *The Fading Fabulosos*



CON the day Balthazar's family disappeared, he did not much feel like getting out of bed.

Sploosh.

A drip of bathwater dropped between his eyebrows. He decided to ignore it.

Sploosh.

Another landed in the same spot.

Still he did not open his eyes. Opening his eyes meant facing another day of being a total disappointment to his family.

Sploosh. Sploosh.

It wasn't like there weren't a million other things he could do well, such as fixing running toilets with paper clips and shoring up their old steam radiators with blocks of wood to stop them from clanging. But none of that made up for the one thing he *couldn't* do: Magic. *Real* magic.

Not that anyone in the audience knew that was what his family was doing. Real magic was their most closely guarded trade secret on account of how stage magic is not actually about magic at all—it's about leaving people guessing. "Once you know the answer to a question, you stop asking

it,” Mr. Fabuloso was always warning them. “We’d lose all our audience in a week if they knew.”

And of course, not all stage magicians had real magic. Not even most of them.

Sploosh. Sploosh. Sploosh.

Eyes closed, Balthazar squirmed around the bed.

The mansion was filled with problems like this—leaky pipes, shorting wires, crooked floors. Which pretty much summed up the problem with his family’s magic. Sure it was great for levitating sofas and turning puffs of smoke into baby turtles, but it was totally useless for day-to-day stuff like shoring up foundations, eliminating dry rot and paying down credit-card bills.

“Don’t worry so much,” Mrs. Fabuloso would say each time they boarded up another room and moved whoever happened to be in it at the time into the next. “It’s exciting to change rooms. Like the Mad Hatter’s tea party!”

Which was why his big sister, Fanella, now slept in the ballroom surrounded by echoes of century-old gossip and flirtations; his grandmother Gaga in the solarium, where she alarmed the neighbors every morning with her nude levitating sun-salutations; his escape-artist little brothers, Franky and Freddy, in the family vault, which they gleefully broke out of every morning; and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Fabuloso, in the conservatory with the haunted piano that woke everyone up at weird hours by playing some horrible unfinished sonata.

Of all the rooms, though, Balthazar liked his the best—an old storage room with a funny little stained-glass window and all his great-great-great-great-grandfather’s old encyclopedias piled high around the room like teetering columns

in an ancient Roman ruin. But the thing he liked best about it was that there was nothing magical about it at all.

Still, like everything else, his room was not without issues.

SPLOOSH!

“Mom, Dad, my ceiling’s dripping again!”

He didn’t expect an answer. Today was a matinee day, which meant everyone was in a mad dash to get cleaned, dressed and fed before they all crammed into the van and raced crazily across town to make it to the theater before curtains up.

The smell of burning pancakes was already wafting into his room, a definite sign that he had overslept.

Splloosh, splloosh, splloosh, splloosh, splloosh, splloosh, splloosh, splloosh.

“Fine!” he snapped, eyes popping open.

The drips were dropping from a large damp patch on the ceiling directly above his head. Not a good sign.

“Coo, coo!” Rover ruffled her white feathers in annoyance as water from the expanding patch dripped over her roosting bar.

“Tell me about it,” Balthazar grumbled, rolling out of bed.

Shoving his winter-break homework out of the way, he moved his dove’s perch to a drier stack of encyclopedias and filled her cup with fresh seed.

“Better?”

“Burrup,” she replied.

Toothbrush in hand, Balthazar shuffled down the long portraits hall, which led to the staircase up to the last remaining functional bathroom in the entire mansion.

He avoided, as he always did, what he imagined to be the disappointed look from the large gilt-framed painting of Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather Fabuloso (G-5 for short).

The legendary founder of the now foundering Fabuloso legacy, a struggling encyclopedia salesman who used coin tricks to break the ice until one day he realized he was making his coin disappear for real. Every Fabuloso since then had been able to do it. Every Fabuloso except for Balthazar, who had to make do with gimmicked props and sleight of hand. “Don’t worry,” Mrs. Fabuloso was always saying. “When it’s time, your magic will come.” “And even if it doesn’t,” she had recently started to add, “you’re still our son and we couldn’t be more proud of you.” It was all rather depressing.

Toward the end of the hall, where the portraits were more recent and the Fabulosos in them more threadbare, Balthazar stopped, as he always did, in front of the portrait of his uncle, the Incomparable Ignatius. It was not crying out to be noticed, at least not in the obvious ways the others were. There were no hologram effects. No mystical smoke. No half-naked ladies. It was just his uncle sitting there in scruffy old work clothes, cleaning out an early-model Colt .45 pistol. But there was something in his arrogant, impatient expression. Something that promised that if you stuck around long enough, you would witness something so spectacular your life would be changed forever.

Next to Ignatius’s portrait was a mysterious empty gap where the portrait of Balthazar’s other uncle, Benjamin, used to hang. The one who had died young and tragically in some unfortunate stage accident.

None of the Fabuloso children had ever met either of their uncles, Benjamin having died and Ignatius having embarked

on an obscure solo career from which he had never returned. “I heard he was famous once,” Fanella had said, shaking her head over Ignatius’s portrait, “but then something happened. Something to do with that terrible haircut, I’m guessing.”

And whenever Balthazar asked about his uncles, his mom and dad would get this funny, uncomfortable look. The strangeness of it all nagged at him, like a scab you can’t help picking even though you know what’s underneath is raw, oozy and better left un-poked.

As he was contemplating this all, an enraged, hellhound shriek ripped down the hall. Crap! Quickly he looked around for cover. Too late. Fanella, in full-on hormonal freak-out mode, had already rounded the corner.

“Watch where you’re going, Spazzazar!” she snarled.

“What . . . what are you wearing?”

“This is how *Magick Gurrrrrls* dress,” his sister retorted, shoving a dog-eared copy of *Magick Gurrrrrl* magazine under his nose. On the cover was a skinny blond girl in a similar micro-tuxedo with short shorts and a plunging neckline. “See? Tell her.”

Mrs. Fabuloso had come up behind him, cutting off his escape.

“Well, some of them, I guess,” Balthazar hedged.

“I thought we agreed not to have this rubbishy rag in our house,” Mrs. Fabuloso snapped, exploding the magazine into tiny shreds with a single condemning glare. “It’s all gossip and trash. I bet that girl isn’t even a real magician.”

“You are so *clueless!*” Fanella shouted, passing her hand over the shreds and restoring her magazine—only now with the cover girl’s arms and legs all mixed up and her tuxedo bow tie under her nose like a mustache.

"This is Stella Estella. Of course she's a magician, and everybody loves her. I'm just doing this to widen our demographic!"

"Our demographic is coming to see us perform our beloved holiday classic, *The Fabulosos' Fantastic Nutcracking Follies*, not *Hoochie-Mamas on Parade*," Mrs. Fabuloso retorted tartly. "We're a family show."

"So what about Gaga's costume, then?"

"Yes, well, when you're as old as my mother you can wear whatever you want as well." Frowning, Mrs. Fabuloso put her hands to her temples and closed her eyes.

"No, don't!" Fanella protested. "That is so not fair!"

Which Balthazar agreed with—actual mind reading being an especially cruel and inappropriate ability for any mother to possess.

"Aha, yes," Mrs. Fabuloso said triumphantly. "Just as I suspected. You are dressing like this to impress some boy."

"I am not!" Fanella shouted, turning bright red.

"You are planning to tweet a selfie of yourself in this costume—over my dead body, by the way—and have it seen by . . . Benny? No. Barney? Blake? *Blake?* Oh, for Copperfield's sake!" Mrs. Fabuloso gasped. "Blake Fistula? Are you kidding me??"

"You just want me to be lame and ugly and never have a boyfriend!" Fanella howled.

"Not true. But the right kind of boy will find you way more . . ." Mrs. Fabuloso paused, searching for the right teen-appropriate word. "More *fly* in your real Clara costume."

"*Fly?*" Fanella repeated disgustedly.

"Fine, fresh . . . fabulous! You're a fabulous girl."

"In that gross flannel muumuu? Are you insane?"

“Much more beautiful than Little Miss Scanty-Pants,” Mrs. Fabuloso said, slapping dismissively at the magazine cover, “isn’t she, Balthazar?”

“I . . . er . . . well . . .” Balthazar stalled, petering out under his sister’s angry, hamster-like glare.

“Oh, please! He knows even less about fashion than he does about magic!”

“Fanella Francesca Fabuloso! Just because Balthazar doesn’t have real magic like the rest of us, that doesn’t make him any less of a person *or* his opinion any less valued *or* his role in our show any less important. I want you to apologize this instant!”

“Apologize for what? How is it my fault that Nutso is magically brain dead?”

“Alternately talented.”

“You only stick up for him because he’s so lame. It’s like reverse discrimination!”

“What did I do?” Balthazar protested.

“Maybe you need to take the day off,” Mrs. Fabuloso threatened, “to think about what it means to be part of a family show. A show where everybody values each other for their own unique strengths.”

“I’ll take the day off,” Balthazar volunteered.

“Don’t you even start,” Mrs. Fabuloso snapped.

“Fine. I’ll quit, then!” Fanella shouted. “I’ll find some other show that values real magical ability and decent fashion sense!”

And with that she spun off in a whirlwind of tears, insults and threats.

Mrs. Fabuloso gave Balthazar a weary smile. “You know your sister didn’t mean any of that. So,” she continued,

changing the subject, “did I hear someone up practicing last night?”

“That would be me,” he admitted.

“Any, you know, flashes of real magic or anything like that?” she continued in the overly casual voice she saved for questions of special importance. “Not that it matters one way or the other, at all,” she added. “Even slightly.”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “Sorry.”

“No, no, don’t be sorry,” Mrs. Fabuloso said, smiling. “You’re fabulous just the way you are.”

“Thanks.” Balthazar smiled back, pretending not to have noticed the involuntary flash of disappointment in his mom’s eyes that had come right before the smile.

2. Bathroom Drama



Squinting around some old patio furniture that blocked the top of the stairs, Balthazar found Gaga reclining on a garden lounger, swathed in a bright yellow silk kimono with twin slices of cucumber covering her eyes. Leave it to his grandmother to make even waiting to use a leaky old bathroom look glamorous.

“Been waiting long?” he asked, plunking down on a box of old programs next to her.

“Long?” Gaga waved the idea away like a pesky fruit fly. “Once when I was doing solo tour I had to wait two weeks on the gnat-infested shores of the Amazon when my riverboat broke down. There I was with no one for company except a tribe of hungry cannibals who had already eaten the first mate. Not that you could blame the poor dears. It was very boggy area with nothing decent to eat. Even the plants were carnivorous. Still, talk about long . . .”

“That’s why I’m never going to the Amazon,” Balthazar said.

“Pshaw,” Gaga replied. “A little adventure never hurt anyone. Except that poor first mate. Oh, which reminds me, I had the most spectacular dream about you last night.”

“About me?” Balthazar perked up.

Gaga had once been world famous for her visions. Once generals, kings and prime ministers’ wives all had visited her salon to sip tea out of her beautiful mismatched porcelain teacups and listen in respectful silence as she read their futures in the patterns of the leaves at the bottoms of their cups.

This was the first vision she had ever had for Balthazar.

“Oh yes, my dear. My memory of it is a little foggy, but you vere in de strangest place, horrible but beautiful, and surrounded by de most spectacular magic.” Gaga frowned, remembering the vision. “Spectacular but dangerous. I was scared for you. You must be extra careful in de next few days. None of your vild risks.”

“Uh, sure,” he said doubtfully. “But I don’t have magic, so . . .”

“You don’t?” Gaga lifted the left cucumber slice to stare at him with one sharp blue eye. “Oh, right,” she said, lowering the cucumber back down, “you’re *dat* one. Vell, not to worry,” she added, patting his knee. “It must have been one of de others. One of de twins, most likely.”

That was when Balthazar noticed the water seeping out from under the bathroom door.

“Who’s in the bathroom?”

“Freddy and Franky,” Gaga said.

Balthazar’s heart sank.

“Guys! Open up!”

No answer.

The door was locked from the inside, but with a hard push he was able to get it open, forcing the lock out from

the dry-rot-riddled frame and releasing a small tidal wave of water into the hall.

Swallowing his annoyance, he sloshed his way to the overflowing bathtub, turned off the taps and looked down. Sure enough, there they were, beneath the water, his little brothers, wrapped head to foot in solid iron chains secured by no fewer than seven different locks and one of Fanella's spandex Magic Gurrri thongs. Both were deathly still.

He hated this. Of course they weren't dead. Or at least it was highly unlikely.

"Come on," he said, giving the tub a kick, "stop hogging the bath."

The boys did not move.

"Want me to tell Fanella you borrowed her thong?"

Their eyes shot open in terror.

"Jabingie! Jabungo! Jabinga!" Their magic words rose up in bubbles through the water, sending the tumblers inside the locks rolling. Three seconds later, the twins were out.

"Sullik llehs esaelp! Esaelp rehl lett nod! Rehl lett nod!" the naked boys babbled in their incomprehensible twin language.

"It's not funny," Balthazar scolded, throwing towels around their knobby shoulders. "You know you're not supposed to practice escapes without a spotter. What if your magic stopped working?" Why was he the only one who ever worried about this stuff?

The twins' faces crumpled like the extra towels Balthazar was using to sop up the pools of water on the floor. "Gnik row dep pots?"

"You don't want to scare de magic out of dem, do you?" Gaga scolded.

“Can that even happen?”

“Is magic,” Gaga replied. “Anything can happen.”

That was when the sinking feeling started. And not metaphorically. The floor, rotted out from years of water damage, was literally caving in beneath Balthazar’s feet.

“Get back!” he shouted, pushing the twins away. And then he was falling down, down, down in a cloud of rotten floorboards, cracked tiles and scummy bathwater, like Alice down the rabbit hole only wetter, dirtier and way faster.

“Razahtlab!” the twins cried.

Fortunately the busted floor was right above his bed, so instead of crashing down on the rusty-nail-studded floor, he landed with a squelch on his soggy mattress.

A really stellar human being would have been grateful that he hadn’t cracked his skull, broken any limbs or suffered some horrific spinal injury. But instead Balthazar just felt drenched, jarred and more convinced than ever that today was going to suck.

“Razahtlab! Razahtlab!”

“Is dead?”

Looking up, Balthazar saw Freddy, Franky and Gaga’s white, frightened faces peering down at him through his freshly ventilated ceiling.

“Not dead,” he grunted. Closing his eyes, he willed it all to disappear. The hole, their faces, his house, his life.

Bam! The door to his room slammed open and Mr. Fabuloso skidded in, harsh flecks of light bouncing off the sequined lapels of his wrongly buttoned sugarplum costume straight into Balthazar’s eyeballs.

“Balthazar,” he cried, popping a handful of Tums, “what’s this? Still in bed? You’re supposed to be the sensi-

ble one—my wingman of the morning. We have a matinee to perform! A matinee! As in *matin*, French for ‘morning,’” he translated. “I want everyone in the van in ten minutes! Get up, you lazy lizards!” he cried, charging down the hall. “Before life’s liquor in its cup be dry!”