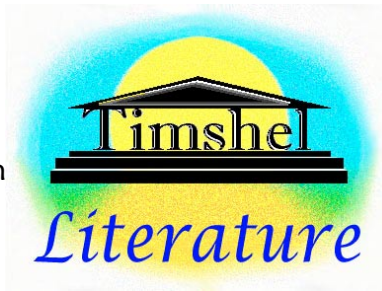


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The First Rule of Magic¹

by Justin Katz

“Is there such a thing as magic?” asked Christopher.

“Sure, kid,” Mr. Grunblie said, pulling the laces of his black leather shoe tight and taking his foot off the bench. He took a quarter from his pocket, and it glinted in the bright morning sunlight. With a swift motion of his hands, Mr. Grunblie held two closed fists in front of Christopher. “Pick a hand,” he instructed.

Christopher tugged his lip for a moment and pointed at Mr. Grunblie’s right hand.

“Wrong,” Mr. Grunblie told him, revealing the empty palm of his right hand. When he opened his left hand, the quarter wasn’t there either. Christopher squinted as if to see through Mr. Grunblie’s sports jacket but giggled when the grownup put his right hand behind Christopher’s ear and produced the quarter.

“That’s not magic,” Christopher said, with a laugh. “That’s just a trick.”

“Smart boy,” said Mr. Grunblie, giving him the quarter and patting his head.

As Mr. Grunblie lifted his suitcase from the ground, Christopher put the quarter in his pocket and specified, “I mean magic like a genie or angel does.”

“I can’t help you there. I think that quarter’s about as magic as anything gets.”

“Nonsense,” interjected Uncle Leo, over Christopher’s shoulder, in his strange accent.

Mr. Grunblie smiled at Uncle Leo, who was sitting on the bench with his hands overlapping on the top of an old wooden cane, and told him, “Well, Leo, I guess you’ll have to pick it up from here, then. I have to get to work anyway. Have a good day, gentlemen.”

Tipping an imaginary hat, Mr. Grunblie turned and walked into the apartment complex’s parking lot. Christopher watched him and tried to remember if a quarter could get anything from the ice cream truck. He turned toward Uncle Leo. The old man was stroking his long white beard and smiling slightly as Mr. Grunblie got into his car. Christopher had always thought that Uncle Leo, who wasn’t really his uncle, should dress up as Santa at Christmas time, but his parents said that Leo was Jewish. Christopher had told them that he didn’t think Santa would mind, especially since they were probably the same age.

“So there is magic like genies and angels do?” Christopher asked loudly enough to distract Uncle Leo from whatever he was daydreaming about.

Uncle Leo looked surprised at the question. “Of course there is,” he said.

“Have you ever seen it happen?”

“Oh, many many times,” Uncle Leo told Christopher, shifting in his seat and tapping the boy’s knee lightly with the silver top of his cane. “Do you remember that big snow storm in January?”

Christopher nodded with wide eyes and a little smile that suggested that so much fun would not soon be forgotten.

“Well, the day it stopped, I wanted to go visit a friend in the hospital, but I thought it would take me all day to shovel all that heavy snow away from my car. But what do you know... when I looked out my window in the morning, my car was already shoveled out.”

“That wasn’t magic,” Christopher told him skeptically. “Mr. Grunblie did that; I saw him.”

Stretching out his face and tilting his head to the side, Uncle Leo asked, “Would it have been magic if the snow had just disappeared before your eyes?”

“Of course!”

“What if an angel or genie did it?”

“Yes. But Mr. Grunblie did it. I saw him do it, and I know how it happened, so that isn’t magic.”

“But I didn’t know that he did it until you told me. And don’t you think a genie would know how it happened if the genie did it? Besides, Mr. Grunblie doesn’t usually do that for me, so maybe an angel told him to do it. Would that be magic?”

“I guess,” Christopher replied, but his eyebrows were lowered, and he didn’t seem convinced. “Does that mean Mr. Grunblie is magic?”

“I suppose for me it does,” Uncle Leo nodded. Then, looking meaningfully at Christopher, he continued, “And you know what else? Magic helped me to scrape the ice off my windshield that day, too.”

Christopher giggled. “But I did that!” Uncle Leo had let Christopher climb on the hood of his gigantic car to scrape the front windshield.

“Exactly!”

“But I’m not magic!”

“Aren’t you? I think you are; your parents think you are; and I’m sure even Mr. Grunblie thinks you are — even if he won’t admit it.”

Christopher tried to think of something else that he had done that might have been magic according to Uncle Leo, but he couldn’t remember anything. Then he tried to think of anything at all that he might have seen that was really real magic and not just a trick. Uncle Leo was wearing a

short-sleeved dress shirt, and Christopher could see the numbers that were tattooed on his forearm.

“Are those numbers on your arm magic?” Christopher asked, pointing to them.

Uncle Leo looked at the faded numbers reminiscently, but without surprise at the question or a darkening of his mood. “No, young Christopher, I’m pretty sure that they are not.”

“Then where did they come from?”

Uncle Leo took Christopher by the hand, and they both stood up. The old man leaned over and smiled closely at the boy. “That is not a story for such a beautiful summer morning. Do you know what today is perfect for?”

“What?”

“Today’s a good day to go around finding ways to be magic.”

“Today? How?”

Straightening up as much as he could, Uncle Leo said, “Well, first you must look around for things that an angel would do if she were around, and then you just do them!”

“Is that it? That sounds too easy.”

Uncle Leo patted Christopher’s shoulder and told him, “That’s the first rule of magic, Mr. Christopher: it will always be easy if it starts at your heart and is done with a smile.”

¹ I actually wrote this story a couple of years ago. However, because it hasn’t been published, because I’d like to put it in the next book, because I’m going to redo my Web site and want to ensure that it remains, because I like the piece, because I don’t think most regular Just Thinking readers have read it, and because I’m extremely busy just now, I thought I’d cheat a little and use it for this week’s column.