

JOHN McMANUS

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## THE FACE OF THE MOON

THE FIRST THING THE OLD MAGICIAN DID when he arrived in a new village was buy a good map, one that showed the topography and all the trails. At one time he had traveled by rail, by moonlight, along the smooth, unearthly beams, but then trains had fallen out of favor in the magician's land, and someday they would vanish from his language entirely.

Do they replace a word when it vanishes?

In our world we do, yes. But in the magician's world? The magician's world is a sad, dying world. The town criers have fallen silent there. The magician wants trains to remain part of his language, but he has let himself grow very old. The words of his spells are dissolving into one another; and now ivy is creeping along the rails that carry him hopelessly and without end through the forests of Castolon.

And Wayman would have said so much more, but it had floated away, until the crickets and owls were his boy's only night, and trains; yes, the magician loved the distant whistlings of the engines, but now, Wayman feared, the magician would be departing their lives forever.

Is he asleep? Kip whispered from the hall.

I don't know, Wayman whispered back.

He's not answering us, Kip whispered.

Wayman grabbed his son's wrist and felt for a pulse. He could measure a pulse in three seconds now. He went to Kip and held him tight, because although Kip was the one dying, his lover and his son were both equally fragile to him. He would need his boy to carry him into the future.

The storms are coming again, said Wayman. Look at the west.

Maybe we'll explode out into fire and be nothing.

Kip didn't have any spirituality at all. It saddened Wayman.

That doesn't sound like a thing you'd believe, he replied.

I read that the poles are shifting again, said Kip. The molecules will switch direction all over earth, within us and around, every twenty thousand years, so everything we're doing will be futile.

Wayman wasn't a real atheist himself, but he loved his partner, and it was a terrible time to think of hurting him. You won't even be at the ceremony, he'd tried to tell Kip, but Kip assumed his look and stared north until Wayman gave up, shuddering at what would be thought of him if there were no funeral, and what their son would think.

I suppose we'll soldier on somehow, said Kip.

In India, the atheists float their dead away on burning funeral pyres, down the rivers and out to sea.

But he could see he was beginning to terrify Kip.

Why don't you go ask Cobby if that's what he wants.

Maybe in the morning, after the sunrise, said Wayman.

But Kip had exposed Wayman's hypocrisy; even asking would be painful for Cobby. A funeral itself would be absurd. There was still a chance Cobby loved neither of them and wouldn't care, because they kept him

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hidden from society in the woods in their cottage under the sweetgum tree to which the storms lowered themselves, causing great explosions. Wayman hoped Kip wouldn't believe he'd ripped their cottage walls apart with the decisions he'd made. When they held each other, they were scared together. It was one of the promises Wayman had made to hold Kip when Kip was unhappy, sitting alone with him those years ago in the savage green valley when the feeling he'd never felt before would put him cold in the grave before he could ever live a life alone. Now Kip said they'd be electrocuted by the billowing waters. He knew what he was doing. He believed in science. The tree might live for years to come, even ripped as it was from its root system.

**K**IP'S VOICE WAS HIGH AND WHISPERY and lonesome on the phone to their ancient landlady. Yes, I know it's storming, he said to her. But a tree has crushed our house. The whole house, and the car. Wayman hated to disappoint people, but Kip had gone straight to the phone, so assertive and strong as he repeated Virginia, Virginia, but Virginia just wasn't there.

It was probably a bad connection, said Wayman.

Old people can't take bad news the way we can.

It must be nice to be old.

She's had some kind of heart attack, said Kip. He tried to call back. Any minute now, the windows of heaven would make them move. Wayman liked this place where no one knew him, but they had Cobby to care for, and so Kip bade him go forth into the storm's world where the magician floated down the train tracks, eating old blackberries that had never blackened, shortening his stride to match the ties that led him straight as a gun barrel through the piney woods. The sapling trees reached above themselves and chose what stars could stay, what stars went cold. There were three ways having a dying lover was like falling in love in the first place. He couldn't think about anything else; also he hadn't been able to enjoy any moment of it; also it frightened him so much to change into what he'd never been. If there were more ways, they were secrets, and he didn't care to learn them. The Bible said to walk the earth, open his eyes to it, so he'd hoped to go farther. At first the white-haired demon on the tracks was just another sapling. Wayman knew when men said *Open up your eyes* they meant that life was getting worse. Whatever it was, it folded its arms across its clothes, and Wayman could barely see eyes between the wrinkles.

You stop where you're going and get here.

Are you Virginia's boy? said Wayman.

But English wasn't spoken where he'd walked to. Had he crossed the state line into Georgia? It was Wayman who had brought his family here, because country people were good people and they wouldn't have to worry, as long as they stayed off unpaved roads and went to the general store one at a time.

First help me out, then go where you were gonna.

Is your name Forbus? said Wayman.

That's one name, said the man.

I have some news for your mother.

Can you tell if somebody's dead or not?

Most people I know are alive.

But if you see folks, you know if they're dead?

Wayman hid why he was uncomfortable with these questions. The funeral wasn't all that tormented him, but it was a central thing he could work his feelings around. Kip wanted so much that didn't work in the world. It made Wayman want to split himself in two. He supposed this would kill him. He didn't believe in western science, and he didn't believe in the principles of things.

You don't want to be going that way none, said Forbus. You ain't going nowhere that way. I think you've got yourself lost. Those tracks just peter out to nothing. Suddenly Forbus seemed as scared as Wayman was scared, and he began to cackle. You'll die if you keep going that way. That is not a good way.

The train bore down the tracks and between them and blocked each man's view of the other. Wayman thought how Kip was being filled with wafts of fuel, too, a mile west. Together they lost themselves in the clackety rhythm. One way not to look at Kip was to pretend he was crying. Wayman couldn't go through the old photographs anymore. Cobby didn't remember those times. On the magician's world, the dying only disappeared like wisps of dust that floated out of sunbeams, and Cobby would agree and nod off so Wayman could write down what he'd learned from the progenitor of his fantasies.

Well, you stuck around for me, said Forbus when the train had passed.

Do you see why I'm not scared of the men here? he dispatched to Kip across their rain-washed mile. They trust in me; your fears are mythological. Forbus held the catalpa branches off the trail for Wayman. In the magician's world, youths still hid their love, because Wayman questioned his own trust too much to nurture it into Cobby, who should experience just enough torment in these years, no more. Wayman's mother hadn't died until Wayman was eighteen, and now he couldn't give his son the same childhood. Kids who didn't love their parents were so free, running off to the wicked cities never to be seen again, so he prayed for Cobby not to consider himself as part of the same blood.

**T**HIS IS A SEVENTY-THREE, Forbus said of his trailer home at the edge of a clearing.

*You ain't going nowhere that way.* Wayman wasn't scared to follow Forbus into a musty room, even if it was a trap. He thought he would have met their landlady's son before, but he and Kip were renegades who'd erased themselves from the map, so when Virginia told stories of growing up in their cottage, of planting the sweetgum tree on her brother's grave in the year 1930, they were ashamed of themselves and paid little attention, focusing instead on the threat she presented, although Wayman felt he and Kip were the threat in allowing themselves not to listen, thinking instead of their own welfare as unwanted settlers on enemy soil.

She's lying down in there, said Forbus.

It was me who called, said Wayman.

I suppose we ought to give her a look.

Wayman followed Forbus into a dark yellow room and climbed a gentle slope to the bed. She's under there, barked Forbus, pointing at a quilt.

If she's alive, she'll need air to get through.

Forbus inhaled a breath for ten straight seconds. There's air, he said.

You think it can get through all those covers?

She sewed it herself. I reckon she knew what she was doing.

Wayman shrugged. Pull them off, then, he said.

Oh, no, said Forbus, drawing back. It's my mama under there.

One tendril of kudzu had reached the window from the trees beyond. The phone was off the hook at the woman's bedside.

That's how it is when it's your mama. You were inside her, dead in her and then you lived. If I breathe her air into my body she'll get inside of me instead, and that's backwards. Lord, I hope she's okay. I don't even know how she mixes up the iced tea.

Wayman looked at the quilt and wished everyone would live exactly as long as their mothers and die on the very same day. And if there was no mother? Kip was the one who needed to live, so Wayman would be the father, but Wayman, of the two of them, was not the man, and had no idea how his body could be made to feel that way.

The ghost world is three feet higher than ours, said Forbus. That's why a ghost is always floating, instead of on the ground. If a ghost stands inside you, its feet are always kicking at your stomach.

Wayman shut his eyes and pulled the quilt from the bed. Virginia's skin was white and shriveled. Her eyes were wide like she was falling off a cliff.

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Her name's Virginia. Never called her by it, though.

She's dead, said Wayman. Good Lord.

Forbus shook his head. You got to use the mirra, he said. Wayman felt sick to his stomach, for Kip had done this to her with the phone call.

You got to use the mirra. Last time I nearly had her in the ground.

Wayman sighed. Where is one, then?

Ain't you got one yourself?

Who carries a mirror around?

I thought maybe you had one of them knives.

Wayman shook his head. All my knife is is a knife.

There was a dresser mirror, four feet wide, circular and framed. Forbus pushed his mother's jewelry box to the floor. Even in these moments Wayman was incapacitated by the same old feelings. He wanted to do something new with grieving. Virginia's ghost was kicking at his stomach, because he could believe at this moment what Forbus had said. The logic that had made him love Kip came geographically closer to him. A mile was too far for Kip to walk! These thoughts as they wrenched the frame back and forth proved little besides his control of nothing, and when the wood snapped, he caught the mirror just before it would have shattered.

Help me hold this, he said.

Forbus put a finger to his lips.

I'll drop it, Wayman threatened.

Shhh. I heard her breathing.

You didn't hear any breathing.

I might have, if you'd have got quiet.

The image of the room behind him dizzied him until Forbus took the other side of the mirror. They covered Virginia's corpse with its round shadow. Dust in the air grew thicker until Wayman finally sneezed, showering the brown paper of the mirror's back side with all the droplets of his spit.

Look at that, said Forbus, she's alive!

That was me, said Wayman. I did that.

Tears began to form in the old man's eyes. He was trying not to move his jittery hands, but then his arms jerked back so that the glass hit a bedpost and shattered, causing Wayman's image to disperse into the four corners of the room.

Forbus gasped. It's all gone. That was all the mirra we had.

Wayman extracted a small triangle of glass from his forearm. I'm sorry, he said as Forbus sank to sort through the motley fragments. Forbus

turned the pieces over and over, and his left foot nudged the jewelry box aside. On its lid Wayman saw a small mirror.

We've got to find the ones she breathed on.

I don't think you'll find any like that.

Hurry, Forbus said, his voice shaking. The frost will fade away.

**T**HERE WERE THREE WAYS, the magician told his apprentice boy, that having a dead mother was like falling in love for the first time: he wouldn't think about anything else anymore; it would frighten him to change his every feeling — but Cobby had never been in love, his mother wasn't a mother at all, and Virginia might have been the only woman he knew, cordoned off as he was from the world, his one grandmother dead and his other having disowned Kip when Kip was fifteen, a common thing really, they said when Cobby asked why, so there were no women in the magician's world save the witches and dryads who mined elixirs from the forest floor.

I think I might know why she died, said Wayman.

She didn't die till we find the frost.

She looks kind of dead, though.

Forbus's hands were beginning to bleed.

I'm sorry. I know she's important to you.

But Wayman had to find a new place for his family. This storm would kill Kip too soon, and Wayman clutched Kip's chest to a chest in his mind. It was the drugs giving him the disease in the first place. He didn't believe in the theory of evolution. He rammed trains together head-on as he waited on the porch for the thunderstorm to end.

We got to put her in the dirt, said Forbus.

Wayman shook his head. I can't help you with that.

That's all right. I've got just the one shovel, anyhow.

He'd been telling Cobby the same stories over and over, because he'd never create again. He understood why dying men killed their families. It was a selfish act, but the selfishness sprang from a deep pool of love. A story he desired to tell Cobby was of a lonely boy whose father



made him work long hours in the tobacco fields. The tobacco would always dry up and rot, because the father would stay gone for months at a time. To stifle his desires, the boy imagined each body part with which he might express his longings severed: his tongue, if he would speak to the saddler's son, his hand if he would touch the tanned skin of the saddler's son. The story went on for many years and even now wasn't quite over, but Cobby wouldn't feel it from within, because he had no loneliness save what their lifestyles had given him. In six months God would cleave their inadequacy in half again. Poor Cobby! thought Wayman, and Cobby appeared from the trees with Kip in hand in thunder so near it was concurrent with the lightning.

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lived.

You got to carry her yourself, said Forbus sadly.

You don't want to wait for somebody? said Wayman.

Won't nobody come, said Forbus. It's lucky you showed up or I would have had to get the engineer.

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How would you have done that?

I reckon I'd just stood there till they stopped.

Is this a funeral? said Cobby.

The rain hit Forbus broadside when he turned to see who'd joined them in the yard. The grave had grown quickly, thanks to the softening effects of the rain, so Cobby stood as high as Forbus.

Mr. Forbus's mother just passed away.

You were right, Cobby said to Kip.

What was he right about? said Wayman.

She loved the sweetgum tree, said Cobby. She told us all about it.

I guess I wasn't paying attention, said Wayman. The strangest things could cause his waves of sadness. He and Kip were sterile forces upon the earth. They were the ends of their lines, and they were death. He averted his eyes from Cobby and thought of being a mother. Everyone was a girl in his mother's womb until the third month, but Wayman

had taken a wrong turn, which was affecting everyone. Forbus drove his weapon spade into a tree root and began to cry again. Wayman, who wept a lot himself, knew how his son would react, and he moved around the grave and held the boy.

You asked him about the funeral, said Kip.

No, I want what you want. I said nothing.

How would he even know the word? said Kip.

Cobby seemed to want to answer, but could not, and Wayman knelt.

Isn't it rude to argue while someone is crying? his son whispered.

It seemed Forbus would never be able to go on.

Let me dig, said Wayman.

It has to be at least a meter deep.

Why did you come here? said Wayman.

Why a meter? said Cobby.

The water was almost up to the sockets, said Kip.

The ghost world is three feet higher than the real world.

**H**E NEEDED TO BE SAVING KIP FROM the diseases of the driving rain. He wished he weren't a fool! He wished he were living in the middle of the Great Depression, kicking into dusty towns whose names he didn't know. He asked his son to remain with Forbus while he led Kip inside the trailer, where he wrapped Kip's shivering body in green quilts. Call Cobby in, said Kip, who was still afraid. Instead they sat together clinging until Kip was asleep and all Wayman wanted on earth was to sleep, too, because they dreamed each other's dreams sometimes, and Kip saw Wayman's apparitions but remained an atheist, and Wayman woke from the miserable visions of the one man who'd promised never to leave him and found himself squeezed tight and lay awake hours that way, till all his earthly thoughts had disappeared.

He needs you now in the grave, said Cobby.

Wayman opened his eyes. I'm sorry we've brought you here.

It's okay. She was so old.

What were you talking about out there?

Dad, you have to carry her outside now.

Why? said Wayman.

He can't touch her.

I don't see why not.

He just *can't*, said Cobby. Wayman knew Cobby was fearful he'd refuse. Cobby understood how strangers could hurt him, and Wayman hoped his boy was glad they lived the way they did. That he liked to experience life vicariously through his books, through Wayman's stories; there'd be plenty of time to suffer later, when they were too old to be a family anymore. The whole time Wayman lay thinking of his son's precocity, he wasn't sad about Kip. The reprieve continued for twenty seconds, until Wayman, to ease his boy's fears, brushed ghost-white forelocks from Virginia's eyes and took her like a baby in his arms.

The rain had stopped. A train was screeching past. Wayman tried not to slide in the mud as he knelt in the grave and bunched folds of Virginia's dress beneath her body.

Is this okay? he asked.

Forbus peered into the grave. I don't know.

I mean, in these clothes, and all?

Forbus looked at the treetops. Things can get wrinkled, he said.

He walked around the perimeter of the grave. Wayman leaned against the mud wall, averting his eyes from the corpse, smearing his jeans with earth.

Will we have the ceremony now? said Cobby.

What kind of a ceremony? said Wayman.

Where we fill in the dirt and stuff.

That's not a ceremony.

Cobby leaned into the grave. Dad, he whispered.

Wayman's eyes welled up. What's the matter? he said.

Don't say those things. Can't you see how sad he is?

Wayman considered that Forbus had a disease of the mind. It would be nice to forget things. He'd been standing in the hole too long, having forgotten the need to move away from the corpse.

Do you want to hear a riddle? Forbus asked.

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Wayman hoped his boy was glad they lived the way they did. That he liked to experience life vicariously through his books, through Wayman's stories.	Kip appeared on the porch. Brothers and sisters have I none, said Forbus. Kip walked out into the drizzle. This man's mother is my brother's son. We should cover her up, Wayman suggested. It doesn't make sense, said Cobby. Forbus scrunched his face up. I was just trying to think of what to say, he told Cobby. People are always telling each other things, so I figured I'd see how that goes.
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Where are we going to live? said Wayman.

Stop it, Dad, said Cobby.

My partner is ill. We have to be dry.

How tall are you? said Cobby.

Cobby, will you leave me alone?

Was it at least up to your waist?

What in the world?

It has to be three feet!

Stop sounding so desperate!

Cobby was breathing erratically as if to induce a panic attack. Kip was lowering himself into the grave, shrouded in green, hovering like a specter, feigning calm, outdoing Wayman, who could try to list these things that made his love seem illusory, and he breathed normally again, if only out of impotence to induce a different thing from what was happening. That's my mother's quilt, said Forbus. It's not yours. I see how it is with you. Who are you and what are you doing with that boy? Where are you taking him down that track? But Forbus was backing up. He was trudging away toward the trees and he was gone, and Kip measured the grave against the inseam of his jeans. It's three and a half feet. What is it about Cobby you can't answer him? said Kip. Why are you the only one who gets to be illogical? Why can't anyone else be illogical? If Cobby doesn't want her ghost to escape from the ground, why can't that be enough?

He doesn't want your ghost to escape from the ground either.

You want the community to come together and know us?

We'll take this trailer as our own, thought Wayman.

What if it were Cobby dying? Why are you in love with your own destruction?

He's just saying it for my sake, said Cobby. You should do what you want.

You know we love you more than anything.

But you've been together longer. It's more important to you.

Wayman embraced Kip. I don't want you to be a ghost.

I don't want to be a ghost either.

But he should have hugged Cobby first, because Cobby had come up with an excuse for Wayman's terrible feelings, and other things. They clung together at the grave's edge until Virginia's pale light rose through them skyward so it was too late to fill the hole again, except to hide the coming stench of death. And because Wayman was inextricably joined to his family, they fell with him when he slipped in the mud. Each man

had to pick another never to abandon; if not one, none; and Wayman chose, covered as he was in the aftermath of the storm, which felt good to him, so that he was moved to take off his shirt and dig into the pile of mud.

This man's mother is my father's son, said Cobby.

That's not even what he said, said Kip.

But it's like us, said Wayman.

When will he come back? said Cobby.

He may have departed our lives forever.

Should we do something? It's getting dark.

But it's clearing up, said Wayman. Look at the moon. He was glad it stood watch above them as they scooped mud into the hole. Its face was white and furrowed like Virginia's, which darkened as they covered it, but the moon's grew only brighter when Wayman saw it ever-higher above the hills. People were lucky to have it buoying them. The magician's world was a moonless world where the blood of the folk knew no tides. It was lonely walking the tracks endlessly without moonlight, but it was a great thing to see new hills, and how they rose, and not to fear them. The crickets cried for mates at sunset, cloaking distant blows of engine steam so he would think he was alone. The wind hit him, but he didn't know it howled. The air was dry, but he was never thirsty, because if he was immortal, it didn't matter how long he went without soothing his parched throat: he'd continue to live.