

***Smoke & Mirrors* by Barry Jonsberg**

Trick 1

Someone once said that hell is other people.

Wrong.

Other people are much worse than that.

Miss Smith's Year Nine class stared at me. Miss Smith stood at the back, next to her classroom assistant, a small smile on her face. I paced in front of the whiteboard.

'Who wants to see some magic?' I said.

There was silence for about two seconds.

'Who're you? Hermione Granger?'

This was a small kid at the front. He had a nose that looked like someone had flattened it for him and a face spotted with freckles. The boy next to him doubled over with laughter. Others joined in. There was back slapping and fist bumps. I sighed.

'No,' I said. 'I mean proper magic, not CGI stuff.'

Silence for two beats.

'Make Alicia here disappear. Do us all a favour.'

That was a voice from somewhere in the middle. More laughter, more fist bumps. Alicia gave everyone the finger. I tried to get back on track.

'Can someone lend me their phone?'

I had to shout over the laughter. It seemed a simple question but it took forever for them to understand it. The Hermione Granger kid finally handed his over.

'Make Gav's porn disappear,' someone yelled. 'That phone's full of it.'

This time I thought the laughter would never end. Even Gav cracked up, his freckled face beaming with pride. I lifted his phone high so everyone could see and pressed the power button. The mobile was locked. Of course it was. I should've thought about that. I had to get Gav to unlock it and that took ages. I was losing my audience. Under other circumstances I would've been glad to lose them. Preferably off a very high cliff.

'Bring up a video,' I said. Then I thought again. 'No porn, okay?'

'That's wasting my data,' said Gav.

'I only want it for about ten seconds,' I said. 'Come on. Hardly any data.'

'Nah,' he said.

'Okay,' I said. 'Doesn't matter. I'll use my own for this demonstration.'

I fished in my pocket for my mobile, got up a TikTok video and showed it to the group.

'The famous writer, Arthur C. Clarke,' I said, 'once remarked that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.'

'What you onnabout?' Another random voice.

'Imagine,' I said, though I had to raise my voice, 'that I could show this video to someone fifty, a hundred or two hundred years ago. They'd think it was magic because they wouldn't understand the technology. So what is natural for us would be supernatural to them. See what I mean?'

The group went silent as they mulled this over.

'But you couldn't show it to them.' Was that Alicia? I wasn't sure. 'They didn't have phones back then.'

'I know,' I said. 'That's the point I'm making. I'm asking you to imagine. It's a thought experiment.'

'It's stupid, is what it is.'

I sighed again.

'And even if you could,' someone else chipped in, 'you couldn't show them videos because they wouldn't exist either.'

Now it was a babble of voices.

'Yeah.'

'There wouldn't even be a way to charge the phone, would there?'

'Nah, they had electricity back then, ya dickhead. Well, I think they did.'

'Yeah, but they didn't have chargers to fit phones.'

'That's right. Because phones hadn't been discovered.'

I thought about telling the kid the word was 'invented' rather than 'discovered' but there was no point. Anyway, that was Miss Smith's job. I waited until the babble died down. A bit.

'I'm trying to get you to *imagine*,' I said. 'Pretend you could go back in time with a charged phone and . . .' I found inspiration. 'You already had this video downloaded, so you could just show it to them. They'd think it was magic, right?'

'So what? You think you can travel back in time?'

'No,' I said. 'I want you to *imagine* I can. Just for the purpose of this illustration.'

'But you can't.'

'I know.'

'So why are you pretending you can? Are you some kind of idiot?'

'Never mind. Forget it,' I said. If you pooled the IQ of this class you probably wouldn't get to three figures. I wiped a sheen of sweat from my forehead. 'Okay. Do you think I could make this phone . . .'

I picked up Gav's again. ' . . . float in mid--air?'

'Yeah.'

'Really?' I said.

'Nah.'

'Okay. Well, watch closely.'

I pinched the phone between my finger and thumb, held its face towards the class. Then I let go. The mobile dipped towards the floor, steadied and then rose again, hovering. This time I had silence. It felt like heaven. Didn't last long.

'It's on strings,' someone yelled out.

'No it isn't,' I said.

'Yeah it is. I can see them from here.'

I took my small metal hoop and passed it over the phone, twisting to show there was nothing keeping it up. *Strings?* Who would think strings? Fishing wire maybe . . .

'See?' I said. 'Nothing holding it up.'

'The hoop is fake,' someone shouted.

'How can you fake a hoop?' I asked, but there was no time for anyone to reply because the bell went and kids fell over themselves to get out of the door. Seriously. Five seconds from the start of the bell to a deserted classroom. Even allowing for Gav to snatch his phone from thin air. Last lesson of the day.

Miss Smith strolled up to her desk, her smile no longer small but edging towards the large.

'You asked to use my class as an audience,' she said as I stowed things in my backpack. 'So what do you think of them?'

'The stuff of nightmares,' I said.

'Welcome to my world,' said Miss Smith.