

24 YEARS AGO

“The Captivating Cosmo X - Master of the Unknown”, the banner proclaimed boldly and proudly as it draped over the long table in neon brightness. The children gathered around in wild excitement and nervous anticipation; their eagerness tempered with fear. It was a potent combination and several parents feared for not having brought changes of underwear.

Tommy Marsh was the birthday boy; he was 12 and king of his own castle, at least for the day. He was an average boy, not overly popular within the school political hierarchy, but then he wasn't one of the downtrodden either. He rode the curve as a happy enough child with friends and loving parents, both of whom had put on today's show for his benefit.

His circle of invitees for the grand performance was fourfold. His closest friend Peter Joffre - or PJ as he was known - was a small and studious boy, always ready with an idea or a plan for rainy days. Russell Dixon and Lee McEwen, who were as close as twins despite not being related, were the trouble makers; always looking to push the envelope, always looking for danger, but fiercely protective of the group. And then there was Alison Chambers. She was a scruffy girl with a perpetual sniff and a wipe of a dirty sleeve. She was the heart of them. Always on the outside of social circles due to her poor family background, she was their unofficial mascot; adopted, protected, and loved.

The summer day was blazing hot with a clear blue sky and a promise of a season that would never end. The Marsh's house was large and spacious holding sway on their street. Tommy's father was a successful lawyer and his mother bucked the town's housewife trend by being an equally successful doctor. Despite their long working hours and flourishing careers, Tommy was never left wanting for attention or love. Although lately, whilst they were always loving towards him, their feelings never seemed to reach each other. Despite their best efforts to spare him from their arguing, the house was only so big, and their noises travelled. The last few weeks they had seemed to fight a lot, and he had little idea as to why. But his birthday was providing a united front, at least on the surface.

The Captivating Cosmo X was a children's magician that had been booked due to Tommy's own love for magic. He was fascinated by a world so removed from the bricks and mortar of his own. He longed for the excitement of the unknown. He longed for the boundaries to be torn down between worlds and to peek behind the curtain of life.

He had been desperate for his party and had been dancing on hot tin waiting for the day to arrive. His presents had gone largely unnoticed and unwrapped as he'd waited - not very patiently - for the magician to arrive.

He was not a stupid child; he knew that The Captivating Cosmo X would no doubt be some middle aged guy with a dumb costume and a drinking habit. But there was always the hope, always the dream that he just might be the real deal; a man of true magic and mystery.

When the chugging van had finally pulled into the driveway, his heart had skipped more than just a single beat. The man that had emerged from the black vehicle had an aura that Tommy felt that only he could see. The man had been tall, far taller than any other adult that Tommy had ever seen before. The man was like a redwood tree stretching to the heavens, but willowy with reedy branch arms that looked like they would sway in the breeze. His face was skeletal thin with eyes that resided deep in his skull in shadowy pockets. His cheekbones were vulpine and sharp enough to cut glass, and his hair was long and jet black. His features looked hungry to Tommy's newly 12 year old eyes and there was an air of danger that seemed to emanate

from him. Tommy noticed that even his father, normally a man of iron will and control, seemed to shy away from the magician's handshake.

Whilst the adults went inside to conduct whatever business adults did in private, Tommy sneaked around to the magician's van, desperate for a peek.

"Where you going?" A familiar voice chirped over his shoulder.

He looked around to see PJ, peering nervously with his usual pained expression. "Just going to take a look PJ," he whispered.

"Hell yeah," McEwen said excitedly as he appeared with Dixon in tow as usual.

"What are we doing?" Dixon asked.

"Gonna cause a little trouble," McEwen enthused.

"I don't know guys," PJ said worriedly, "What if we get caught?"

"Ah, nut up you baby," Dixon laughed.

"Wait for me guys," Ally said joining the group.

Tommy sighed. All he'd wanted to do was to take a peek at the creepy magician's private sanctum, but it had rapidly turned into a group expedition.

"Alright, just come on if you're coming," he hissed.

The van was long and black with a spayed logo on the side. It didn't look particularly bright and colorful and Tommy couldn't help but think that it didn't seem to be in-keeping with children's parties. He carefully headed around the back and tried the rear door. The handle turned, but he stopped.

"Ally, go keep lookout,"

"Shit on that," she bristled, using her newly discovered and favourite curse phrase. "Why do I always have to lookout?"

"Because you're a girl," McEwen giggled.

"The hell I am," she snapped back. "PJ's more of a girl than me."

"She's got you there," Dixon laughed, slapping PJ on the back.

"Alright, PJ go keep lookout," Tommy ordered, growing impatient.

PJ went without complaint, seemingly happy to keep his distance from any shenanigans that would get him in trouble. Tommy knew that PJ's father had been what he had overheard his own father refer to as a "Drunken bum" ever since PJ's mother had died two years earlier.

Tommy pulled the van door open, wincing in case of any loud creaking that would signal his nefarious intentions. The door swung open smoothly and he peered into the darkness. The large van's interior was paneled and lined with wooden shelving and transparent plastic boxes that held a myriad of colorful offerings. In the centre of the van and strapped to the sides with black rope lashings was a glinting machine that caught all of their collective breaths. The guillotine stood proudly with waxed wood and a glistening vicious looking blade that caught the outside sunlight along its dangerous edge.

The four of them gathered around the deadly instrument in awe. Tommy noticed that for once even Dixon and McEwen were silent. Ally stood closer to him and he felt her trembling heartbeat thud against his arm as she gripped him in fear.

"Cool," Dixon whispered, breaking the spell.

McEwen joined him and together they began to run their grubby sticky fingers over the waxed wood, probing the joins and stroking the blade.

"Dammit!" McEwen snapped as his thumb was split open by the steel and a thin blood red trail spilled from the wound and onto the van floor.

Dixon's usual tact allowed him to laugh at his injured friend.

The four of them began to inspect the device with growing fascination as their fear gave way to intrigue. The dark chestnut wooden frame was tall enough to almost reach the van's roof. At the base there was a split wooden block with each piece having a half moon curve that made a circle when joined together. The slanted metal blade was suspended by a rope that was tied at the side and restrained by some of the strapping secured to the van's side panels. Tommy could see delicate carvings in the wood and traced his fingers over the crafted artwork. He peered closer and could just make out images that looked foreign and depicted men and women being dragged to their doom.

"French, I think," Ally whispered from beside him.

She had a growing tendency to cling to him lately he had begun to notice. Normally it was an irritation but right now he was glad of the comfort.

Dixon and McEwen began prodding and pulling at the blocks and clasps that littered the side of the guillotine.

"Don't mess around with it!" Tommy hissed.

"Ah, it won't work," McEwen grumbled as he kicked the sturdy side of the machine.

"Is this where the head goes?" Ally asked, looking at the two piece block at the bottom.

"Let's have a look," Dixon said barging past.

Tommy watched on. He was fascinated and terrified in equal measures as Dixon began pulling frantically at the wooden block. It was clear to see from the join that the block was two pieces that formed a circle which a head would poke through. Dixon's fingers were not dexterous and his mind was not technical. He was trying to pull the two pieces apart through brutish strength.

"Bloody thing's stuck," Dixon grunted.

Tommy looked more carefully and could see that there were two small metal catches on either side. In spite of himself he couldn't refrain from helping. He stepped forward and fingered the metal restraints. He popped the first one open easily and quickly, followed by opening the others. "Here," he said, gently easing Dixon out of the way.

"Alright brainiac!" Dixon laughed. "Hey Ally, come stick your head in here," he motioned.

Ally took a step back and Tommy took one forward. He was maddeningly curious to see the guillotine in action, but he also did not want to see Ally's head literally on the line.

"Out of the way babies," McEwen said pushing Tommy and Ally aside roughly.

Tommy held his breath as McEwen lay down on the plank and placed his head through the semi circle on the bottom piece of the block as Dixon held the top piece in the air. When McEwen was still, Dixon lowered the top piece and the block was sealed around McEwen's neck.

"So how does it work?" McEwen inquired from his prone position.

Dixon's usually hard face was momentarily crumpled in concentration as he stared at the workings on the side of the apparatus. Tommy and Ally both moved forward to join him and the three of them began staring intently at the pulleys and levers. For a moment Tommy forgot that one of his friends was lying in an extremely precarious position beneath them as the problem of making the guillotine work became a mental exercise.

"Maybe this one?" Dixon said pulling hard on a tethered rope.

Tommy gasped as the large heavy blade slipped a little.

"Maybe here?" Ally added as she pulled a small metallic lever.

This time there was a clicking noise from somewhere inside the machine, but nothing else.

Tommy looked with his eyes instead of his friend's approach which seemed intent on looking with their hands. His gaze scanned the various ropes from where they were anchored to where they ran. The machine looked old, and close up the wood smelled heavily of wax and polish. He reached out to touch the rough rope that seemed to be holding the blade. He took the weight in his hand and pulled it slightly and was surprised at just how heavy the blade was. The edge looked razor sharp and there was no trick as far as the authenticity of the damage that it could inflict. His eyes scanned further and saw a small switch that reminded him of the points on a railway line. It seemed like once the switch was altered then the blade would fall harmlessly past the victim below. He was so caught up in his dissection of the illusion that for a moment he forgot McEwen was lying below him.

"Piece of crap," Dixon snapped as his limited patience ran out and he kicked the guillotine hard.

"Tommy's heart skipped a beat as something slipped inside the mechanism of the guillotine. Suddenly the weight of the blade that he had been testing lightly fell and he found himself taking the full heavy load. He desperately gripped the rope with sweating palms. "Jesus," he hissed as his feet were dragged forward and the blade slipped further.

"Uh guys?" McEwen said a little nervously. "You can let me out now."

"Help me, I can't hold it," Tommy whispered through his straining arms.

Ally quickly stepped forward and lent her weight to the struggle. Even so Tommy could feel the blade fighting him and wanting to fall.

"Get me out!" McEwen shouted, his voice full of panic as he squirmed under the restraining block.

Dixon went to the sealed block around McEwen's neck and tried to prise the small catches open, but he struggled with his large clumsy fingers. "Shit, I can't open it," he panted.

"Dixon, help me quick," Tommy said as his feet were pulled forward again and the rope slipped another notch through his aching fingers. He looked down into McEwen's now terrified face reflected in the blade's silver glow. Just as he thought that the fight was lost, Dixon's reassuring strength joined his as the bigger boy shoved Ally out of the way.

"Ally, get McEwen out," Tommy whispered as his arms shook with the effort.

Ally quickly knelt down and worked on the catches with her smaller nimble fingers.

Tommy could feel the blade was not set up to fall with only gravity to guide its way. There was obviously some sort of counterweight measure that would drive the blade down fast and hard. Even with Dixon's added effort they were still fighting to prevent the blade from flying downwards.

"Ally," Tommy whispered as sweat dripped from his forehead.

Thankfully Ally didn't waste time answering. She pried frantically at the last stubborn catch. Blood began to drip from her fingers as the soft flesh was torn open in her desperation.

The rest happened in slow motion before Tommy's eyes. He saw Ally finally lift the top piece of the restraining block just as he felt the rope slip from his grasp scorching the skin. Because of their holding the blade against its will the tension had built up meaning that the downward force was now amplified. He could do nothing but pray as McEwen lifted his head from the block and sat up just as the blade fell. There was a split second that lasted an eternity as the race was too close to call. The blade fell fast as McEwen moved quickly. He could swear that he saw the vicious cutting edge slice the top of a single hair on McEwen's head as his friend leapt forward. The blade smashed down hard into and through the separated restraining block. The sound was monstrous in the confines of the van as the clanging echoed off the walls. However the illusion was supposed to work, it wasn't this. They all looked at each other with green gilled faces; eyes opened wide and full of shock. Suddenly they all burst into scared laughter as the tension was slightly dispelled. Tommy began to wonder if they had damaged what looked like an expensive piece of machinery and shuddered at how many lawns he might have to mow in order to pay it off.

"What are you doing?" A voice shocked them all from behind.

Tommy turned and found a bleary eyed woman with too much makeup and glazed eyes staring up at them.

"Out, now," she commanded with a slightly slurred voice. "Andale, Andale," she clapped.

Tommy and Ally trooped out with heads bowed and cheeks burning in shame, whilst Dixon and McEwen bowed their heads to get a look down the woman's glittery top as they elbowed each other.

Back in the daylight Tommy could see that the woman was obviously dressed as a magician's assistant. She wore a tight spangled top that glittered with sequins on top of a bright red ruffled skirt and fishnet stockings. Her face looked pained and well worn with lines around her eyes. She smelled of cigarette smoke that was unsuccessfully covered by a choking heavy perfume.

"Get back to yer party," she grumbled, shooing them away.

The four of them ran back to the garden to find PJ sitting uncomfortably sipping soda on the table that was laid with food and drink.

"Nice one you chicken" Dixon snapped. "You were supposed to be keeping watch."

Tommy saw that McEwen was set to punch PJ hard on the arm, "Leave him alone," he ordered.

McEwen looked over in challenge to the order before dropping his arm in compliance. It was an unwritten rule in the group that no-one ever raised a hand to another; it was always them against the world.

"Sorry," PJ mumbled sheepishly.

Tommy couldn't hold a grudge against his friend and he knew he shouldn't have left him on lookout. The reason they normally left Ally to keep watch wasn't because she was a girl; it was because she was the calmest under pressure and the most reliable. Already the thought of the near fatal accident was receding. It now seemed foolish to believe that they had been as close to disaster as he'd first thought. He was increasingly sure that his imagination must have been running riot as they couldn't have been that close to tragedy on such a sunny day.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU," his parents sung, interrupting his thoughts as they exited the house carrying a cake blazing with 12 candles. His friends soon took up the song, with Dixon and McEwen chiming in to take the piss as usual.

After the food was served and everyone was stuffed, it was time for the show. Tommy had barely eaten anything as he could not forget the glinting steel in the back of the van.

The Captivating Cosmo X - Master of the Unknown began his act in front of his banner draped table. His routine was a succession of tricks and props that Tommy had seen before and although the man had an obvious talent, his patter was dull and overly practiced. His hands were dexterous and skilled but Tommy couldn't help but feel a little disappointed by the magician. The man's creepy appearance had now seemed like the imagination of a child. Tommy had just about given up on the guillotine making an appearance. He was thinking that maybe The Captivating Cosmo X had an adult show in his repertoire, when suddenly it was wheeled out into the sunlight. He heard his parents and the other adults gasp and a few laughed nervously. The guillotine was even more imposing in full effect. The Captivating Cosmo X took a firm hold of his assistant whose unconvincing assistance had previously looked bored and disinterested. Her face was suddenly a mask of fear and Tommy's interest perked up. He moved to the front, away from his seated friends and the standing parents behind them. He knelt on the grass only a few feet from the show.

"Ladies and gentlemen," The Captivating Cosmo X spoke loudly and his voice was surprisingly high and

girlish. "This guillotine is an actual instrument of death as used during the French Revolution. Imagine if you will the noble men and women who marched their way to their doom before this mighty blade."

Tommy saw his parents grow concerned over the sudden dark turn in the act, but all of his friend's attentions were now rapt.

"Just how many souls this old girl has taken, nobody knows. The blood and screams of death are burned into her very wooden bones," The Captivating Cosmo X hissed theatrically. "But no matter how many lives she has taken, she is always hungry for one more."

Tommy looked on as the assistant squirmed in the magician's grasp. Her face was now alive with fear as she tried to break free.

"I told you I didn't want to do this bit," Tommy heard her whisper, but the magician pressed on as though she hadn't spoken. "Dammit Arnold, don't make me."

Tommy could see soft tears spring from the woman's eyes and her heavy black makeup began to smudge.

The Captivating Cosmo X - Master of the Unknown dragged the woman to the guillotine and forced her effortlessly into position. Tommy looked around but no-one else had seemed to notice the woman was now sobbing gently. All of their attention all seemed to be focused on the glistening blade.

The wooden pieces snapped together around the assistant's head holding her in position as The Captivating Cosmo X walked around to the side of the machine and gripped the rope that restrained the blade. He wound his fingers into the frayed rope and unhooked it from the safety position, taking the weight in his own hands.

Tommy felt his heart pound furiously as it seemed like only in his close proximity position could he see directly into the woman's eyes which were wide with fear. Everyone behind him were holding their collective breaths and waiting for the blade to fall and end the show. He looked up at The Captivating Cosmo X - Master of the Unknown, who now seemed scary again. His smooth face was pale and his eyes looked off into the distance. Whether it was all part of the show or not, Tommy couldn't tell. He wanted to shout a warning, but he didn't want to seem like a child scared at the movies. He only stared on and prayed.

"Madame Bouvier," the magician announced to the gathering, "You have been found guilty of crimes against the people. You have been sentenced to pay the ultimate price for your betrayal. Have you any last words?"

"Please," the woman whispered, "I'm sorry," she said in such a small voice that Tommy thought that he was the only one who had heard her. "Arnold, I'm so sorry."

"VIVE LA FRANCE!" The magician screamed as he let the blade drop.

Tommy shut his eyes as the blade fell. Because of his proximity only he felt the warm splash of sticky liquid on his face and heard the soft bouncing thud on the lawn. As he opened his eyes to stare at the horror of the decapitated assistant's head, his ears were soon ringing with deafening screams.