

Secret Revealed **by Jean Wong**

My childhood was spent taking orders from my brother. Thomas, two years older, was enterprising and inventive while I could never think of anything to do. My main view was the back of his head—straight brown hair, slight shoulders bent forward painstakingly working on model airplanes or baking a perfect lemon meringue pie. He would spend hours under the house, working on a mega bomb created from leftover firecracker powder. I was his eager servant, fetching the supplies, but never allowed to do anything important such as beating the eggs or lighting the bomb.

Thomas' passion was his absorption with magic. I was mesmerized as he transformed an ordinary deck of cards so that each card became a four of hearts, or made a stream of scarves appear out of his mouth. I eagerly paid money for his secrets. Did I feel cheated when mystery's underbelly lay flat and exposed—that the cards were cut different sizes or the scarves hidden in a plastic thumb? Just for an instant; then magic cast its glow and preyed on my willingness to wonder and pay another quarter for the next trick.

One day I saw Thomas working in the garage with a large pile of plywood. He was busy hammering and sawing.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“You'll see,” he mumbled.

Thomas was thirteen and I was eleven. He never spoke to me in complete sentences as he did with his friends. A younger sibling and a mere girl, I was only worth a few syllables.

Every day I would hang around and check on his work. It seemed like a big box—perhaps five feet square. Was he making another club house? He'd already built one that sat in the forest that bordered our property. In a few days, he had painted it red with a black striped border. I noticed that the front and back had hinges and clasps which he also painted black. When it was finally finished, I was baffled by strange gold symbols and signs on each side. The box sat glimmering with color and carrying a weighted, magnetic presence.

“You're going to disappear in that,” he told me.

“Disappear!?” I gasped.

“Yup, disappear, and then re-appear.” He planned to enter our school's annual variety show. He and his best friend, Sidney, would handle the box while I would be the one who vanished.

I was thrilled. Images of Aladdin and beautiful exotic princesses filled my head. I was going to be on stage—just like those glamorous Hollywood movie stars. To disappear—and appear! This feat was

going to trump any silly song and dance act.

The disappointing part was that I wasn't really going to vanish. Thomas showed me that the trick depended on a big v-shaped panel that could swing back and forth.

Perched on the base I would “disappear” by leaning against the panel. The weight of my body would force the panel to swing back so I could be hidden. By making it move forward I could then reappear. This took strength, as I'd have to maneuver the very structure that I was sitting on. Everything had to be done quietly as no loud thud should be heard when the boards hit the floor.

My dismay at being let down by another revealed secret quickly faded as we began to rehearse. There was a great deal of practicing to do as I had to build up my strength and agility, and Thomas needed to make certain adjustments while we perfected the trick.

Finally, the day of the performance arrived. I woke up, drowsy from lack of sleep, having fitfully dreamt of all the fame that would soon be mine. I got dressed and went into my mom's room which had a full length mirror and tried to arrange my hair. But the image that stared back at me was unsettling. Where was the glamour in the reflecting glass? It didn't seem right for me to be climbing into a magnificent red box, dressed in a pink blouse and a yellow and orange plaid skirt.

I'd never paid much attention to how I looked, as my parents emphasized good grades rather than appearance. But lately, my mom told me that I was eating too much ice cream and that only pregnant women had hips like mine. I could see that I didn't look princess slim. I looked through my mom's clothes to see if I could find something more suitable, but all her stuff had ruffles and bows. Then I went back to my own closet. Everything I tried on made me look more ridiculous—that ill-matching skirt and blouse would just have to do.

As I passed by the mirror for the third time, I caught sight of my hair. My mom had taken me to the hairdresser a year ago and given me my first permanent wave. As my bangs grew longer and covered my eyes, she refused to let me trim any expensive curls. My hair was a mess—wild and unkempt, random strands sticking out. I got some bobby pins and tried to flatten everything down. I used up the whole pack and still no Hollywood image appeared in the mirror. My dad began honking the horn. I had to go.

At the school, I found myself backstage peering at the big magic box sitting front and center before a huge assembly of students. I breathed in shallow gulps when I spotted some friends and even a few of my teachers. The announcer introduced “The Great Thomasini Houdini!” The excitement felt overwhelming. Thomas, Sidney, and I made our appearance. Managing a bow to the audience, I got into the box.

Thomas was a natural on stage. He lacked the usual adolescent awkwardness and was a

convincing performer. He began his suave, personable magician's patter about this "never revealed ancient wonder" and slowly turned the box around, uttering various *abracadabra*, *alakazam* incantations. The disappearing part was fine as I deftly leaned against the panel and brought it towards the back. I could hear the *oos* and *ahs* as Thomas opened the front panel showing an empty box.

Thomas began to turn the box around, going into his smooth talking build-up about the box's astounding capacity to "reverse the laws of matter." But it was when I was trying to appear again, that my skirt got caught in the panel. I couldn't get the right balance to push the panel towards the front. I could hear Thomas approaching the box, ready to open the panel. I pushed as hard as I could, cutting my finger against a screw. The panel began to move, flipped to the front, and landed with a loud thump. I was finally able to stand up and present myself— my skirt torn, my finger bleeding, and all of the bobby pins dangling from my hair. I hardly heard the applause as we bowed and exited the stage.

After the show, my classmates came rushing up to me and asked "Where were you? Did you feel invisible? What did it feel like to disappear?" Their eyes glistened eagerly, expectant. But I was tired, sweaty, unsightly, and my finger was hurting. I felt scornful at how easily they'd been duped. The trick seemed tawdry and obvious.

That day marked the end of my fascination with magic. I never again paid Thomas money for the secret of his tricks and began to view his performances with a hard skepticism. For years, the box sat aging in our garage, eventually used as a dog house. Whenever I passed by, there'd flit a painful memory of the foolish delusions that had disappeared in that magic box.