

The Manly Art

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This story was first completed on Sunday, March 17, 1991 and was most recently revised on Thursday, March 11, 2010.

This document is approximately 3,207 words long.

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The Power

Legend is riddled with accounts of common people who acquired uncommon powers. Genies in magic lamps, pacts with the devil, unexplained mental abilities, appearances and disappearances, and dozens of other esoterica lay the groundwork for countless fabulous tales. No doubt, most such yarns are clever fabrications, but not all of them. The universe is wide and reality is never completely distinct from the realms of imagination. Fantasy and mysterious truth are sometimes not so very different from one another.

The Power that came to Milton Manly wasn't an end in itself. It was a by-product, nothing more. It was an unnoticed side effect of a process remote from our home in the galaxy. The Power came to Milton Manly all at once, without warning, while his back was turned. This was The Power that Milton Manly received, that anything that he said became fact.

The Power, as it came to Milton Manly, came with at least two problems. One problem was that The Power was very literal. When it acted, the result was all or nothing. Another problem was that Milton Manly didn't know that he had The Power.

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Milton Manly

On the morning that Milton Manly received The Power, he awoke feeling particularly bland. When Milton Manly felt bland, it was a most uninspirational feeling. Milton Manly was a very bland little fellow even in his most flamboyant mood. He had pale eyes that never saw anything interesting because his thin little neck never turned his dull face toward anything new. He had wispy hair of an indeterminate color and two weak little arms that would have lost at arm wrestling three matches out of three, even with each other. On the particular morning that he received The Power, Milton Manly wasn't interested in anything at all, even by his own dull standards. It wasn't that he was stupid. It was just that, well....

That morning, Milton wandered sleepily around his room, drank a cup of tea, ate a bit of oat meal, and eventually drifted into his clothes. He sat and stared at the clock for a while. Eventually, he noticed that it was eight o'clock.

"I'm late," he muttered. Milton didn't notice it at first but, the instant after he spoke, the time shown on his clock changed. For the first time, albeit unknowingly, Milton had used The Power.

Milton decided that if it was already 8 o'clock, then he'd better hurry. Then, to his amazement, he noticed that clock said 4:25 P.M. He thought vaguely that if he wasn't careful then he wouldn't just be late getting to work, he'd also be late getting home. With uncharacteristic energy, he rushed from his room taking time only to polish his shoes, wash the things from breakfast, straighten a few magazines, check the time again, make his bed, organize the shirts hanging in his closet, and straighten his tie. As he headed for the back door, Milton wondered briefly where the day had gone.

Milton's filing job at the Court House usually kept him safely out of touch with most people. Milton could probably have been late for a month of Sundays and nobody would have noticed. He'd taken the job during his younger days, back when he'd been more assertive. Back then, he'd been sufficiently aggressive to seek a job and, besides that, his father had been pushing him to get out of the house. Milton and the job had grown into each other over the years. As Milton hurried from his room that evening, he was thinking lovingly of his small desk in his quiet corner of the Court House basement, and of the blissful seclusion that it offered.

The long walk across the two lanes of Baskalin's main street to the Court House every morning (and back to the rooming house every evening, of course) constituted the second most bothersome part of Milton's uncluttered life. The most bothersome part, of course, was the regular and unavoidable necessity of walking to Avery's General Store. It was such a LONG block and a half, all the way to the other side of downtown Baskalin. Worse yet, after he'd managed to work his way through the teeming twos and threes of people that crowded the sidewalks, the store was usually packed with customers, as many as four or five at a time.

Milton normally went to great lengths to avoid contact with other people. When it was necessary for him to leave the rooming house at all, even if he was just going to

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work, he used the back door. He felt that the extra distance was a small price to pay for the seclusion of the alley. Thus it was that when Milton headed for the Court House that evening he headed not for the street, but for the alley. He didn't go out the front door of the rooming house. He went out the back door. As he wandered out the door, he careened off of Moe, the town drunk.

Moe the Town Drunk and Joe Burd

Milton rebounded from the tipsy, wobbling Moe like a marble from a bowling ball. On the rebound, he felt a daze of confused embarrassment and totally uncharacteristic (and growing) anger. A few moments later, Milton might chastise himself at great and painful length but the plain fact of the matter was that, for the moment at least, he was angry. He had just experienced a very unusual and puzzling day, what there had been of it. Unusual and puzzling things did not sit well with Milton. Furthermore, it had occurred to Milton on his way to the door that if Commissioner Grundy noticed his absence, then he might have to answer for it in person. The Commissioner was a large, loud, and brassy man. The Commissioner's voice alone drove Milton to distress. A confrontation would be most unpleasant. It might also be true, although the matter is open to debate, that The Power itself might have been partially responsible for Milton's unusual anger. Whatever the reason, the unusually short day, Milton's worry about having to face Commissioner Grundy, the embarrassment of sitting on his derriere in the alley, whatever was the cause, it was more than Milton could tolerate. In a burst of totally uncharacteristic bravado, he exclaimed, "M-m-my! You c-c-certainly are in the w-way, aren't y-you? He-He!" Again, The Power acted. Moe stumbled over nothing in particular and sat suddenly at the foot of the steps just as Joe Burd, the owner of the rooming house, came hurrying out the door. Joe was struggling with a double arm load of 39 gallon plastic bags of trash, and muttering "Why the hell don't nobody but me never take out none o' tha gol-dang trash — oof!" Joe tripped neatly over Moe. The garbage bags went sailing as if they'd been launched from a catapult. Across the alley they went, spinning like axles, smashed into the board fence on the other side of the alley, popped open, and dispersed their contents like hand grenades. "GOD dammit trash all over the fuckin' alley now I'll hafta pick it all up, GOD damn — "

Moe stood up and wobbled uncertainly toward where Joe was bent over pitching debris back into a garbage bag. He was muttering and trying to focus his eyes, and wondering if he could score another drink over at Bradley's Bar, when Joe's imaginative monologue was interrupted. Alleys are, after all, a natural habitat for cats. Alleys are also frequented by dogs. It isn't surprising, therefore, that there was a cat nearby. Around the corner it came and, at its heels roared Bolger, the nemesis of the local cat population. Joe was bent over stuffing garbage into the bag. He didn't see the cat coming and the cat didn't see the bag. The cat streaked between Joe's legs, headlong into the bag. Bolger tried to dodge the spectacle, ricocheted off of Moe, and careened straight between Joe's legs. Yelping in surprise, he streaked into the trash bag hot on the heels of the cat. The nearly simultaneous impact of the two animals knocked the bag out of Joe's hands. Trash went flying. Joe's feet shot out from under him. Bolger and the cat became a flurry of snarling, yelping, and hissing activity in the bag, completing its divestment of its last bit of trash and, indeed, of most of its remaining resemblance to a trash bag. The cat escaped. Bolger tried to follow suit but crashed into Moe who, deciding that it was time to leave, listed in the direction of the street, and tried to stagger away. Everybody but the cat and Milton came together in one simultaneous tangle of flailing limbs, curses,

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yelps, and crunching egg shells. Milton watched in amazement as Bolger, having lost all sense of the chase collided with Moe no less than three times while trying to escape. Moe just couldn't seem to stay out of the way. Milton recalled, with perplexity, the prophetic nature of his recent utterance. He recalled saying that Moe certainly was in the way. Since then, nothing seemed able to avoid colliding with him.

Joe, in a frenzy of frustrated fury, had long since become incoherent or, perhaps he'd only exceeded Milton's vocabulary. He sputtered an incomprehensible curse and pushed and shoved the miraculously standing Moe toward the street straight into the arms of dear little old Granny Blandford, from up the road a piece.

Dear Little Old Granny Blandford, From Up the Road a Piece

Granny Blandford had been in town to do a little grocery shopping. Walking back toward her modest house near the edge of town, she'd heard an unusual commotion coming from the alley. In all innocence, she'd stepped up to the alley entrance to see what was happening. She had, only an instant earlier, been standing solidly on her own two feet, holding two sacks of groceries, a handbag, an umbrella, and the leash of her Pekinese. Suddenly, she was no longer doing any of those things. Getting streaked by a cat, tripped by a yelping dog, landing on her fanny, and stampered across by two cursing men who were apparently insane and soaked with old coffee grounds did not make it a nice day for Granny Blandford. Her comments for the next minute didn't match her meek appearance. During that brief sixty seconds, some sixty-six years of lady-like demeanor and sterling reputation went out the window.

Milton's mind boggled at the sheer QUANTITY of empty Pepsi and Coors cans, banana peels, canned beets, empty milk cartons, denture adhesive, Centrum Silver, lady's magazines, little green grapes, Mylanta, spools of sewing thread, empty toilet paper thingies, plastic bags, empty cereal boxes, and left over mashed potatoes that littered the alley and the sidewalk. While Granny Blandford and Joe Burd tried to get to their feet, Moe's leg had become entangled in the leash of the Pekinese, who's yipping had attracted Bolger back into the fray. The noise was a deafening cacophony. Granny Blandford's umbrella had somehow gotten shoved under her dress, then opened. There it stuck, immovably impaled in her nylons and her petticoat, holding her legs out against her dress so that she couldn't even sit up. She was embarrassed and quite vocal about it. Had they not been hidden from view by the umbrella, her bright red panties, long unsuspected by the good people of Baskalin, would then and there have become public knowledge.

Moe seemed to be everywhere at once. Liberally lubricated by smashed okra and leaking shampoo, he slid around like a pig on wet ice. He got unerringly in the way of every attempt to avoid him or to stand erect. With surprising agility for a fat and baffled drunk, he managed to get his feet under him but he just COULDN'T seem to stay out of the way. As The Power continued to flex its muscles, he stepped on an innocent bystander plastic sack of little green grapes, lost his footing again, and shot out into the street. By the time that he finally rolled to a stop, he'd succeeded in stopping all traffic in both directions. Poor Moe was really in a jam.

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Lucy Lou, One of Baskalin's Unmarried Ladies, Still In Demand

Milton pulled himself together and went back up to his room. It was long past quitting time. He didn't see any point at all in trying to go to work. Instead, he stared out of the window at the situation in the street below. Everybody in the county seemed to have decided to come to town for the evening and they all converged on poor Moe. It seemed that no one could manage to get past him without either bumping into him or stumbling over him, depending upon whether he had just gotten back up or just been knocked over again. He certainly was in the way. Milton watched with dull interest and muttered, "Dear me, but there certainly is a lot of confusion down there this evening!"

At last, The Power had a REAL challenge. Suddenly, the sounds from the street changed from a collection of irritated curses and epithets to a growing murmur of fear. Fright, born of a LOT of confusion, spread as far as Milton's eyes could see. The fright was contagious and Milton soon began to be afraid. He backed fearfully across his room, holding his hands out in front of himself as if to ward off an attack of some kind. In fear, he half whimpered, "What's going on? I wanna know whas happenin'."

For the first time, Milton had used The Power on himself. Suddenly he wished with all of his poor feebly thumping heart to know what was happening. He rushed back to the window. The crowd was slowly dispersing as panic stricken individuals ran confusedly around, apparently lost, and every path seemed to cross poor Moe, who was finally curled into a protective ball in the center of the street.

Milton had never particularly wanted anything in his entire life, except to be left alone. But after whimpering that he wanted to know what was happening, Milton wanted to know what was happening. He wanted it like no man had ever wanted anything before. He wanted it so intensely that he could not think of anything else.

Milton ran from his room, ran down the stairs, and grabbed the first person that he encountered. That person happened to be Lucy Lou, in her very tight hot pants and her barely adequate halter top. Lucy Lou was one of Baskalin's unmarried ladies. She was a few years older than she used to be, but she was still in demand. Bradley's Bar was on the outskirts of town, just a few blocks away, and Lucy Lou had been in her room dressing for the evening's business. Thus, her lack of confusion. She was just stepping out, heading for Bradley's. It was a Hell of a job but somebody had to do it.

Normally, Milton was incapable of even looking at such a provocative woman but, in his eagerness to know what was happening, he ran right up to her and ran right into her. In his haste, he accidentally hooked his glasses on the edge of her halter top and, rebounding and grabbing for support, he ended up temporarily in possession of the aforementioned item of clothing. After all, he was a short little fellow and he wasn't used to running and anyway, accidents do happen. While he was trying clumsily and with a certain amount of embarrassment, to untangle his glasses from the halter top and return it to her, he asked, "What's going on?! What's happening!?"

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“Well, if ya’ll just hang onta ma bra an’ bring it with ya, I’ll explain it all in my room, ya silly old thing!” Her drawl was thick, sexy, and suggestive. Maybe she wouldn’t have to go to Bradley’s for her first trick tonight.

In his unaccustomed frenzy, Milton squeaked, “I’m...”, and stopped to clear his throat. Perhaps he was becoming a little more embarrassed, what with — her, and all. Anyway, getting his voice back under control, he stuttered, “I’m n-n-not s-silly!” And instantly, Milton wasn’t silly. He was, in fact, ultimately sober and calm. All indication of his previous frenzy disappeared. Even his silly appearance changed. Milton was distinguished. Composed. Debonair. Suave.

Unthinking, yet with grace, poise, and style, Milton continued in a cultured voice, “Nor am I in the least, elderly.”

The Baby That She'd Always Wanted

A much, much younger Milton fell to the floor. He panicked because of the sudden fall and the encumbering weight of the adult's clothes that were draped across his tiny, helpless form. For the first time in over 40 years, Milton screamed the frantic scream of a newborn baby. In spite of her shock, Lucy Lou could not resist helping the poor crying child who'd appeared so suddenly in front of her, out of nowhere. In her surprise, she momentarily forgot all about Milton. Later, she was never sure exactly where he'd gone. It was a blur in her memory.

She absently brushed Milton's clothes out of the way, not even seeing them. She picked up the baby and held him tenderly. He slowly calmed, and cuddled snugly in her arms. She'd always wanted a baby but in spite of some heroic efforts over the years she'd never had one. Now, here he was. Lucy Lou wasn't the brightest of women and, sometimes, she just didn't question things. She went into her room and packed the clothes that she'd need. She didn't have to work any more. She'd go back home to Momma.

Lucy Lou walked out of the rooming house, carrying her baby and a suit case. The Greyhound Station was just around the corner. She walked happily across the street, toward the Court House and the Greyhound Station just beyond. She was blissfully unaware of the surrounding chaos. She carried her baby carefully, holding it even more securely when she stumbled across Moe. Behind her, in the gathering darkness, confusion reigned.

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