

# THE ANATOMY OF MAGIC



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*THE ENCHANTED HACIENDA*

**J.C. CERVANTES**

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# **The Anatomy of Magic**

*J.C. Cervantes*



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For that kid in California who never stopped believing in magic.

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“You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”

Unknown





# **1**



I'm still breathing.

My heart is still beating. Both scientific indicators that, yes, I am technically alive.

And yet...

I speed down the remote highway with the window half down, an unlit cigarette in my mouth.

I've been driving for two days.

Closer to three if you count the time that I spent in traffic trying to get to LAX before I passed the exit. I couldn't do it, couldn't shove through the crowds. I couldn't face all those strangers going about their lives with some kind of purpose they believed mattered.

I suppose we're all guilty of it. Believing whatever version of reality suits us.

Still, a flight home would have been so much easier than sleeping at rest stops and ignoring my basic hygiene. It would have been faster at the very least. But I wanted to drive, to feel the open road beneath me, to be the decider on this journey.

To just once, be someone else, someone who wasn't a serial perfectionist believing in the glossy illusion of control. Sometimes I imagine a normal life

with normal expectations. Maybe I could be that person who has a house with a lawn and a walkway lined with pumpkins every fall.

*What would that feel like?* I wonder as I adjust my sunglasses and hike my left leg up to rest on the seat. Probably boring as hell.

As I drive along the deserted highway, the Sonoran Desert is its usual beautiful. Forever skies, columnar cacti, and a horizon I'll never catch. The view, for just a moment, takes my mind off the reason that I'm here in the first place.

Because I ran.

Because I couldn't stare at my colorless apartment walls another second. Because I wanted to crawl out of my own skin. Because I'm a failure and a coward.

Ultimately, running away fell woefully short of my expectations. The memory followed me anyway.

I can still feel the cold of the operating room, can still hear the clanking of metal, and the voices. God, there were so many voices. And then came the horrific silence. The kind that stays with you forever. It's the kind you can never outrun.

I turn down the podcast that's automatically rolled over from my original playlist: *Terror in the Deep South*. I would never subscribe to a show like that. Who knows? Maybe it's a ridiculous sign from the universe. Regardless, I prefer happier topics like health or fitness or some other version of living your best life. Ironic for a doctor who's going ninety-five with a cigarette pressed between her lips.

Although I'm pretty impressed that I haven't lit the thing yet, a habit I broke in med school six years ago. I don't even know why I bought the pack—a desperate attempt to reach into the past maybe? My therapist cousin, Dahlia, would tell me that there's an avoidance message in there somewhere as well but I'm too exhausted (and uninterested) to attempt an analysis.

Two hours and three non-murder podcasts later, I pull off the highway into La Ventana, a spellbinding town tucked into the rolling highlands of Mexico. The sweeping hills are dotted with colorful haciendas for as far as

the eye can see, with miles and miles of gold and green between. It's like a painting that never fades, never changes.

The closer I get to our family farm, the more the knot in my stomach tightens. Mom only knows what I texted her: Coming home early. Don't ask or I'll turn around. I'll talk when I'm ready.

I half expected her to balk. Instead, she surprised me with, We can definitely use more help with the wedding.

Wedding? Whose wedding? Between a gaggle of family friends and neighbors, it could be anyone's but I was too spent to even ask.

Easing up on the pedal, I feel that same painful heat winding through my heart, spreading like fire across my chest. I've been in denial, pretending that it was heartburn, or stress. I know better.

Just like I know when the symptoms began.

Now I glance at myself in the rearview mirror—tangled dark hair I haven't bothered brushing in over a thousand miles, sunken eyes, and a worn face. My mom might accept the mystery of my early arrival, but she'll never accept a ghost for a daughter.

Still, how can I tell her what happened when I haven't even processed it myself?

I pull over near a street stand selling tacos to try and freshen my woeful appearance. Where did I put my makeup bag? Shit. Did I even pack one? I rushed out of the house so impulsively the memory of it sends my pulse skyrocketing.

I take a deep breath and then another, remembering the five senses technique Dahlia taught me.

"Okay, sight," I say aloud, looking for five things to name them.

"Boy with a stick of corn," I say as my eyes dart about the scene. "Agua fresca. Orange handbag. Bus with way too many people. Scrappy dog in a hurry."

Next, I search for four scents. Carne asada, poblano, and cilantro fill the air, making my stomach grumble. I realize all I've eaten on this journey is

half a bag of Doritos.

Just then my phone buzzes and I never get to the fourth scent.

It's my oldest sister, Harlow. Is it normal to weigh a thousand pounds two months before giving birth?

Seeing her name, along with the tiny photo of her face that accompanies it, forces me out of nomad mode and back into the expected identity of Lily Estrada, youngest sister of three, fixer of all things, weaver of memory magic.

Biting down on the end of the cigarette, I text back, Definitely.

We're all excited for Harlow's baby to arrive, but when our mom heard the news that she was finally going to be a grandmother she nearly exploded with confetti-like joy.

At least we won't all be subject to the torment of a gender reveal party. Harlow's having a girl just like every Estrada before her. It began generations ago when my great-grandmother Margarita accepted the Aztec goddess Mayahuel's blessing that every female descendant would be blessed with her own brand of magic. We were given the ability to grow mystical flowers on our land, to create enchantments, and be committed to forever protecting love, passion, and beauty. But there was a catch, a price that each of us would have to discover and bear on our own.

A price I thought I'd paid ten years ago.

I'm a miserable stuffed potato, Lil.

\* \* \*

You're growing a human, I manage to type back. Of course you're miserable.

While we know Harlow's baby's a girl, we won't know her name until the birth when Mayahuel whispers into my sister's ear. Like each of us, the child will be named for a flower. The only one without this designation is Harlow herself, who up until four years ago believed that the meaning of her name,

heap of stones, was a cruel fate meant only to remind her of her lack of power. That was until she discovered that she's the most powerful of us all, an encantadora who multiplies our magic.

She's not human, I swear! I'm growing a new breed of the kraken.

\* \* \*

I fumble through my purse to find the boot lighter I bought at a convenience store on the Tijuana border. More dots flash across my screen, and Harlow clearly isn't done with her rant.

It's a lie you know. There is NO GLOW, Lil! You're an OB. You should have warned me!

\* \* \*

Lighter in hand, I lean my head against the headrest, close my eyes, and take a deep breath, grateful for a moment of privacy that's rare in my family. If this were seven months ago, Harlow and every woman in my family would have already known something was very wrong with me.

We've always had a deep psychic connection, opening channels to our emotions and signaling to the others when something significant was happening. But ever since Harlow got pregnant, those channels have all but closed. Mom said it's typical. *After all, she told us, Harlow is growing a new generation of magic. That takes tremendous effort and there are only so many mystical resources to go around.*

I'll have to thank the little kraken when I meet her.

My phone buzzes again.

Are you trying to get out of this? Harlow asks.

Out of what?

That you didn't warn me.

About the kraken?

About all of it!

\* \* \*

To try and take her mind off it, I respond, How's the new book coming?

She sends an angry-faced emoji.

That bad? I start to rub out the Dorito stain smeared across the front of my white sweatshirt.

Worse than that.

\* \* \*

Before I can reply that she has dreadfully underestimated the value of *worse*, I get another text. This time it's from Seth, a radiologist I went out with a few times. Up for a drink?

Seth's intolerably handsome, has a disarming smile, and can talk about nearly any subject as if he's part AI, but there's no *it* factor, no spark. Just like nearly all the men before him.

I realize he must not have heard the news yet, which makes me wonder how the hell I'm supposed to respond. I go for the least complicated version. Out of town for a bit.

As soon as I hit send, I realize the text went to Harlow by mistake.

In an instant, her confusion flashes across the screen. Huh? Wait, where are you?

There's no sense trying to lie. She's going to find out soon enough that I'm home two weeks earlier than planned. We're all scheduled to be at la

Casa de las Flores y Luz later this month for the annual Celebration of Flowers, a sacred tradition when each Estrada woman asks for the goddess's blessing as we press our hands into the soil to enchant the new crops.

Favor? I'm too exhausted to explain anything.

Shoot.

I'm home early and please don't ask why. I'm still figuring things out. Can you just accept that I'll tell you later?

\* \* \*

As I wait for her response, I tug my dark hair into a ponytail, pinch my cheeks, and swipe some mint balm across my chapped lips.

Okay, Harlow texts back. I can feel the tension in those four little letters. Are you all right?

No. I'm not.

I've never been a wisher, never wanted to hand over my power like that, but right now, in this fragile moment I wish that I could use my memory magic on myself.

All it would take is the exact right blend of blooms made into a breathable concoction. One inhale, maybe two, and all the pain would be gone.

I've seen the effects of my magic, the relief in people's faces the moment the memory they no longer want to carry evaporates. Even then, I've never liked being the thief who carves away someone's history. I prefer the giving of a memory—when someone relives a beautiful moment, every sound, scent, touch. As if they've traveled back in time to experience it once more.

I slump farther, realizing that in the end, it doesn't matter; the women in my family aren't allowed to use magic for our own benefit, at least not for anything significant or life-altering.



I send Harlow a thumbs-up, turn off my phone, and toss it onto the passenger seat, knowing that eventually I'm going to have to face this, that I'm going to have to talk about it. The inescapable reality presses against my chest with a heaviness that's making it hard to breathe.

I consider going back to Dahlia's senses exercise, but a mass of storm clouds is sweeping across the sky, so I pull back onto the road and drive toward home. With each mile, my anxiety expands. The darkness closes in.

I flick open the lighter and press the cigarette to the tiny flame, inhaling deeply, drawing in the poison, reminding myself that I'm still breathing.

I'm still breathing.

## 2



The moment I'm halfway up the long stone driveway, a different world comes into soft focus.

It's a trick of the eye really, as if the house doesn't want anyone to see its grandeur and rugged beauty until just the right moment.

From a certain distance, our home looks unassuming with its thick adobe structure and red tile roof half hidden behind sweeping palms and high walls.

\* \* \*

In my mind's eye, I step through the romantic archway into a colonnaded courtyard with a verdant garden and trickling waterways. The house holds myriad secrets and hidden corners that even I haven't discovered yet. There are winding staircases that lead to dead ends, walls inexplicably erected over the years, and unexpected doors tucked here and there that have either been sealed shut or open to mysterious alcoves no one uses.

Beneath the canopy of trees, I stop the car, roll down the window, and sit idle, basking in the one thing I can always count on whenever I'm home: a sense of calm that washes over me.

I take a deep breath and then another, filling and emptying my lungs with the oxygen-rich air. The anxiety slowly retreats like a cowering animal, but I know it isn't gone for long.

The January air is crisp, clean...

I search for the scents of my childhood: honeysuckle, lavender, rose. There's nothing. I inhale slower and more deeply this time, waiting for the floral aromas to reach me.

Alarm bells begin ringing in my head.

There are no traces of jasmine or peonies or orange blossoms wafting across the farm. Why can't I smell the flower fields?

Was it the cigarette? Did it mess with my senses? No, that's ridiculous. I had no trouble smelling the tacos from the street stand.

I jump out of the car and take another breath, searching for any flowery scent at all. All I smell is tobacco and distant rain.

Tobacco. Shit.

The last thing I need right now is a lecture from my mom. "Mija, you are a doctor." I can see her finger waving at me. I try to anticipate a way out of it and come up with a half-baked lie about a smoky restaurant. But she'll never buy it. Magic aside, you can't keep anything from that woman. Definitely not worth it to be a smoker *and* a liar.

I pop open the trunk, tug a clean sweatshirt out of my luggage, and do a quick change. A part of me wants to sneak right inside, take a soothing shower, and fall into a forgetful sleep, but the other part of me is determined to investigate why the hell the farm doesn't smell like the farm.

I mean, seriously. The flowers, this house, this land, our magic—these are my constants in an otherwise unpredictable world. Things have been shaken enough these past few days, I can't bear to imagine what I would do without them. Hell, my own magic *depends* on scent—it's how I choose which flowers to use for a memory spell. An unspoken language between me and the blooms.

Slipping through the shadows, I go in search of some flowers, cutting across the expansive driveway and down a dark flight of uneven stone steps

that leads to a cascading jungle of wild plants and trees. Even now, at the ripe old age of nearly thirty, I cower the way I did as a little girl when the trees looked like monstrous figures waiting for just the right moment to pounce.

When I reach the first landing, I glance around, wishing the moon was just a bit brighter. I'm certain there are flowers here somewhere.

Quickly, I power on my phone and turn on the flashlight. By the crumbling stone arch are a group of potted white geraniums, symbolic meaning constancy, folly, and deceit. The trio of words seems at odds until I rearrange them to mean "foolish devotion leads to deception."

Leaning down, I press my nose to a bloom, and breathe. There aren't the usual notes of citrus with hints of rose. As a matter of fact, there's nothing. How is that possible?

Trying not to panic, I run through a mental list of medical possibilities, coming up short. Sure, there are lots of reasons someone might lose their sense of smell or taste, but I've never heard of someone losing the ability to specifically smell flowers.

I drop onto a wooden bench, tug my knees into my chest, and wrap my arms around myself, tighter and tighter as my body tenses and the familiar heat blazes in my heart again.

How can this be happening?

I tell myself to get a grip. To focus on the facts.

The peculiar symptom began soon after I met my patient's son. I can still see his thinning hair, the lines around his deep-set blue eyes, his crisp pilot's uniform.

A pair of wings pinned to his chest.

I answered his questions, assuring him that this was a routine surgery. He was edgy, chatty—I felt for him as he tried to convince me that he had nerves of steel, and it was only when his feet were on the ground that he was out of sorts.

Each word he spoke about flying was another step into my past.

And then he uttered those five words: *the sky is my home*.

Instantly, the memory I'd locked away came rushing to the surface, stirring my magic. Forcing me to remember a different time, a different me, and...a desperate spell I had cast so long ago that I'd all but forgotten.

Until now.

Here in the dark of the garden, I take deep even breaths, searching for the calm rational part of me.

There's no evidence that old spells can cause physical symptoms. And even if they could, why now?

Lightning cuts across the sky in a series of bold flashes, as if the goddess herself is trying to send me a message: *even magic cannot fix this.*

"Lily?" My mother's voice comes from the shadows, startling me out of my reverie. I look up and see her slim frame at the top of the steps, backlit by some distant garden lights.

"What are you doing down here?" she asks.

Her voice is a soft, comforting sound that instantly turns me into a child. But I was never the needy daughter like Harlow or our other sister, Camilla, preferring to either ignore whatever was bothering me (still do) or bury my emotions so deep even a mole rat couldn't find them.

Before I can say a word, she closes the distance, lithe and graceful, pulling me to my feet and into a solid hug, one that says, *I'm sorry for whatever you're going through.*

A part of me is terrified that she's going to break our agreement and immediately start asking questions, but to her credit, she says nothing, only holds me closer, "I'm glad you're home."

All I want to do is sink into her embrace, but years of training in the science of fortitude, resilience, and, above all, a detached persona keep me from falling. In my line of work, I don't have the luxury of breaking down, or giving in to my emotions, and the practice of it has left me a ghost of who I once was. I went into medicine to heal, to make a difference in the health outcomes of women, and over the years, I was introduced to a broken system, one that values profit over patient care.

I squeeze my eyes closed, fighting the tears. Remembering to breathe.