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Confessions of a Conjuror

Derren Brown

DERREN BROWN

CONFESSIONS OF A CONJUROR



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Tricks of the Mind

Portraits



CHAPTER

— 1 —

I loathed myself again. My heart pounded beneath my *stupid* blousy gay shirt, and as ever, I found it absurd that I had done this a thousand times yet still battled with the same weary desire to be veiled in the shadows of a corner, to keep out of everyone's way and let them enjoy themselves in peace. I was conscious that the grey eyes of the French barman, who had now seen me emerge from the disabled toilet three times in the last fifteen minutes, were resting on me with an appropriately mixed signal of curiosity, admonishment and condescension. This glance, on reflection, may have simply been the natural look of a Frenchman abroad, but it struck me at the time as a recognition of my ludicrously transparent capacity for procrastination, and my self-hatred ratcheted up another notch, making it even more difficult to shake myself from the immobilising stupor.

For all he knows, I have to prepare mentally and take time to choose my spectators with care and precision. So with a serious expression I surveyed the restaurant for the hundredth time and flipped over the deck of cards in my hand.

The new deck of red-backed Bicycle-brand poker cards had that afternoon been worn in for the good through bending and riffling and springing until the deck's spirit had been broken; in the way that a puppy, made to walk to heel, piss on the newspaper and not eat the roast, loses its bungling vigour and learns to behave. A brand-new Bike deck is, for a short while, wanton and precarious. For those first few minutes it may simply spread effortlessly in the hands, the cards riding the frictionless slivers of oily space that lie between each virgin surface and gliding on their own advertised 'air-cushioned finish'; absorbing and re-directing the pressure of the fingers into a beautiful, even spread at the slightest touch; each pasteboard fluidly moving along with its one-higher/one-lower neighbour. But so marvellous as this evenness of movement is, and as satisfying as it feels to see a ribbon of fifty-four perfectly spaced and ordered indices appear almost instantaneously between the hands with an apparent mastery of controlled pressure that could not likely be wielded upon grubbier cards after a career of practice, the new deck is at other times reckless and prone to belching itself without warning from the hand, leaving usually just two cards held: a circumstance caused by the natural moisture from the thumb and forefinger pads adhering to the back of the top card and face of the bottom card respectively and holding them back while the others issue defiantly from one's grip towards the floor.

Idiot. In my velvet frock suit and ruffled cuffs, like some ludicrous hybrid of J. S. Bach and Martin Kemp back in the day. Around the bottom of my face a goatee like a seventies pubic bush, untouched by clippers since its first appearance as a student years before and which would remain so for another year still, reaching madly in all directions, until one morning, standing at the mirror in my freezing mezzanine bathroom just down the stairs from my flat, I would eventually cut into its sides with the bacon scissors with a view to divesting myself of it completely, and a pleasing Mephistophelean point would emerge.

I held the deck level in my hands and played at tilting and squeezing the slippery pile, almost but not quite enough to discharge it on to the flagstone tiles in the manner I found myself considering. I pictured them tumbling to the floor, myself bending over to gather them up, and the embarrassment

derision of the silent diners as they watched me carry out the apologetic, uncomfortable process. ~~caught myself being distracted again, and tried to heave my attention back towards these covers I was~~ being paid to entertain. Tried, but within seconds my focus returned obsessively to the shifting fifty-two pasteboards in my hands and the further preoccupation they offered.

Following the unstoppable spillage caused by the combination of pinching pressure and the mere accidental misalignment, the finger and thumb will instinctively continue their trajectory towards each other following the sudden disappearance of the remainder of the deck, and the top and bottom cards (in the case of a newly opened and unshuffled set of Bikes, these will always be the Joker and a advertising card offering a discount of fifty cents against further purchases from the US Playing Card Company) will be brought together in an action not unlike that of a belly-dancer's finger-cymbal while the balance of the cards lie scattered on the floor in a face-up/face-down slop. Here you are faced with two sources of annoyance, the greater being the anticipation of having to kneel down and begrudgingly assemble the cards into a disordered pile of single orientation, which involves not only upturning all the downturned cards (or vice versa, whichever set is smaller), but also the trickier task of neatly squaring up a near-deck of chaotically strewn playing cards into a single satisfying block. This is easier said than done, and is most easily achieved through a manoeuvre known to experienced card-players and magicians: grabbing the entire set of misaligned cards into one cluster and holding them perpendicular to the floor (or table), then *rolling* the messy stack back and forth along its side until all the corners have been brought into alliance. The secondary, lesser source of displeasure is the niggling sense that the deck has been soiled: it may never again be seen in manufacturer's order, and the patented air-cushion finish has most likely been forever lost following the intrusion of hairs, skin flakes and other carpet debris into the spaces between the cards.

The barman was now busy dealing uninterestedly with a fat man wearing a thin, loose tie who was peering at the whiskies over the counter. The bar was pushing into the man's stomach as he heaved himself high enough to read the labels on the Glenmorangies, Laphroaigs and Macallans that authoritatively lined the raised shelf behind the brandies and cognacs. He was pushing up on to the balls of his feet and grasping with both hands a brass rail that ran along the front of the bar perhaps a foot below its edge. I wondered what he was feeling at that moment: the tension in his hamstrings, the cool brass, the push of the counter into his middle section, the straining of his eyes and jutting forward of his slack neck to recognise the labels on the bottles. I tried to recreate these sensations mentally and considered, as I tensed and shifted in microcosm, that that was what he was feeling *right now*; that for him the experience of all life revolved in this instant around those sensations, and that I was (with my annoyance and self-hatred and reluctance to work) at most a blur in the corner of his vision.

As he pointed to a bottle and then, a beat later, happy that the barman knew which he required, hauled himself back to standing straight, I tried to lose myself in what I imagined his world to be. I tried to picture the bar and barman straight-on, to hear the buzz of the restaurant behind me rather than to one side, to imagine the feel of his meal inside me, his weight on my bones, the faint sensation of comfort following the loosening of shoe leather from across the bridge of my toes as he lowered himself back to the floor. I wondered whether he had picked a whisky he knew well – I imagined so, but the range was not especially adventurous and he seemed to care about which one he was given – and whether, in that case, he was at that moment imagining the walloping peaty taste he knew he was so keen to enjoy. There was something in the showy ease of the barman and the assured way in which he set the glass upon the counter that had about it a hint of performance, a suggestion of the 'flair' that sometimes flamboyantly attends the preparation of cocktails; I presumed that the man was noticing

this affectation too, with mild irritation at its pointlessness, and making quiet judgements accordingly. I did the same, following my own references: a blurry memory of a poster for the film *Cocktail*, and a repeated film-loop of a chess player planting a knight upon a square and firmly twisting it into place with that same defiance.

A woman passed by, having emerged from the ladies' toilet behind me, and the game ended. The sound of the refilling cistern within was bright and loud, and then abruptly muted as the door bumped closed. The fat man wobbled away from the bar and from me, a little inebriated, and my empathy with his thoughts and sensations was lost under the high ceilings of the wide, noisy lounge. The restaurant was again before me, and my hand again noted its grasp of the cards. I resented the severing of that connection, and wondered whether being privy to a person's meandering thoughts and gently tracing their dreamy associations was to really know them, at a level far deeper than answers provided by personality tests, school reports or the selective, retrospective narratives of traditional biography.

I watched the man manoeuvre himself to a low stone slab of a table in a far corner of the lounge occupied by his chattering friends, who paid him no attention as he placed his glass down with a faint double *cli-clink* and remained standing to look round the room. His eyes trailed uncertainly in many directions while I observed, and passed me, still searching. Eventually they found the back of one of the slim, neat, white-clad downstairs waiters, who was taking bundled napkins and glasses (each containing an inch or so of part-melted ice, a citrus sliver and a long plastic stirrer) from an unoccupied table and placing them on a round, black, rubberised tray.

The fat man approached him unseen. The waiter began to walk towards the large carved wooden door that led to the small kitchen. I knew where the glasses and napkins would be put: I had seen the colossal dishwashers and machines inside the small downstairs kitchen where meticulously wrought cold starter platters were prepared for those who wished to nibble downstairs before moving upstairs for their main meal. The older, larger man was moving more slowly, but called something to the waiter before the latter had a chance to disappear into the back-room hive of steel and steam (and usually, heavy-accented discussions of what stock might be needed for the next day). The waiter spun round to greet the man, eyebrows raised, suddenly alert and smiling. The smile remained as he almost imperceptibly jutted his head forward and narrowed his eyes to understand the gist of a lubricated glutton who did not speak his first language. Barely had the fat man begun to speak than the waiter looked towards me and pointed with a gesture made by flattening his free right hand, palm to the left, and tracing a full arc in the air. This full-handed point alighted almost directly upon me for a beat, and then, as one, his fingers levered quickly and neatly at the knuckles, signifying to the man the secondary, left-turn instruction that was necessary to locate the gents' toilet. The man mouthed an acknowledgement and started to walk towards me, slack-faced and lumbering, slightly sad and out of place, away from the enthralled and exuberant jabbering at his friends' table.

I watched him approach, nearly colliding with the blonde girl from Bolivia or Bulgaria who squirted mists of sweet-smelling liquid on to tables when the diners were gone, but who wore the black outfit instead of the white and whose English was as impenetrable as the joyless eyes that peered from the depths of her dark, grave sockets. I moved to my right to give him ample room to pass, and as he came close he saw that I was looking at him. We both dropped our gaze and, glancing indifferently at the cards in my hands, he shuffled past. I saw the shabby edges of his black soft-soled shoes, and his wristwatch, the brown leather strap tight around him like wire pulled around dough. My mind flashed back to the annoying band on the water-snake toy I had as a child. This was a green, endlessly rolling-in-on-itself water-filled balloon that would shoot from your hand when you tried

grip it, but which was encircled by a band of rubber: a band which not only disappointingly betrayed the edges of the infinite loop, but also, being slightly too tight for the toy, stuck it intermittently and upset its otherwise smooth, unholy operation. (It eventually emerged that the water inside these toys was contaminated, which motivated my mother to throw mine away despite my protestations that it would be extremely careful never to burst it.)

I turned my attention back to the cards undergoing the absent-minded and precarious manipulation in my hands. They were red-backed, as ever, because the other readily available colour, blue, had never appealed. Blue cards contrast less satisfyingly than red with the green baize of a card table and the jet black of the suit I wore when working, and red has the advantage of a certain new-worship pizzazz over the duller blue. Blue-backed cards are stolid PCs to the lively Apple of reds; they are B or BA to Virgin. Since leaving school I have had as much distaste for blue ink in fountain or rollerball pens as I have had a general fondness for the pens themselves. Blue was the prescribed ink colour at my primary and secondary schools, and I cannot use it to this day without feeling in my gut that I am again a student and should be handing in my work for marking. This is not dissimilar to the way the sight and smell of a particular cheap pink liquid soap, dispensed from a hand-operated sink-side pump in a favourite Italian restaurant near my apartment (and an Indian restaurant in Blackpool), fling me back, like Proust's *petite madeleine*, to ages five to ten and the vivid recollection of my primary school wash area, with its uneven green-painted cement floor and baking-parchment toilet paper and shoe bags and football boots. The smell of the soap quickly commingles with the earthy scent from the studded footwear and the chemical pong from the lavatories, and in this olfactory-led reverie I can recall details I haven't thought about in decades. In this proudly old-fashioned school we used dip pens, and the ink from our Bakelite inkwells, full of sediment and finger-staining, was always blue.

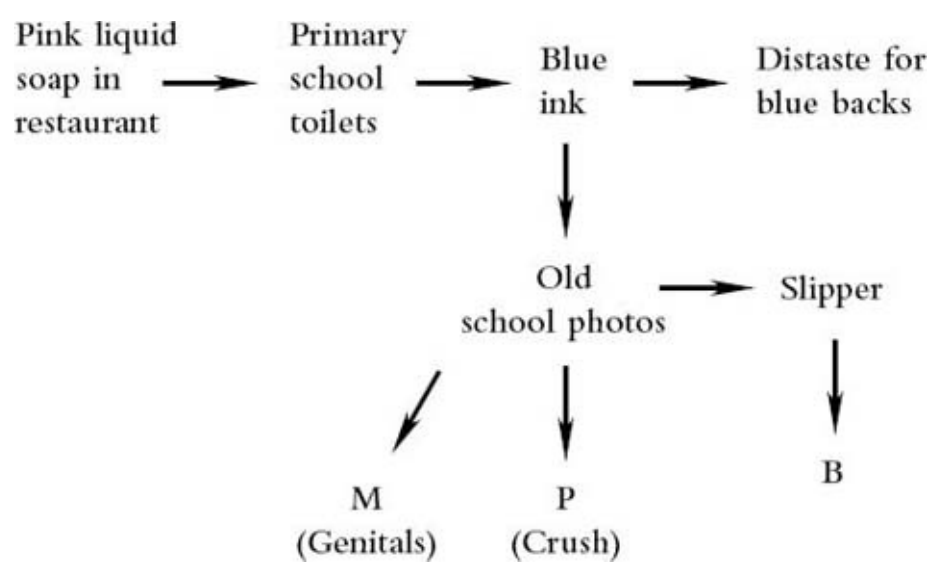
School ink. Later, at a fine, leafy grammar school in Croydon, turquoise ink was a favourite of Mr Pattison, and is thus firmly associated in my mind with the affectations of much-admired and gently eccentric teachers. For many years during and after university I liked to use brown ink, and enjoyed the rather Victorian effect of the sepia-toned script that flowed unevenly from the tortoiseshell Park fountain I still own, and which, I note now after a brief search, is still crusty with the very same ink of which I speak, the barrel now firmly secured to the nib section through years of neglect following a shift in allegiance to the breathless peaks of Mont Blanc some time ago. I have since settled for black ink following an urge to purge myself of what I felt to be the more obvious poses in my life: somehow, with the ghost of my ambivalent feelings towards Mr Pattison's mannered turquoise notations still faintly lingering presence, brown ink had to be replaced with something less showy.

To be swept back by an unconscious association to the muddy, soapy smell of the wash-and-change area of our primary schools by a restaurant's thrifty choice of hand-wash, and once in the sense-memory to recall the origins of a faint distaste for a particular ink, and from that aversion to understand why thirty years later we have chosen to buy hundreds of playing-card decks wholesale with one back-colour over another; to be thrown into that long-forgotten world and to remember details which a conscious effort would be unlikely to produce, is to connect to those years with a peculiar immediacy.

This happens in stark contrast to the discovery of old photographs of ourselves at the same age. The mental image we carry around of our classmates seems to age along with us, to the extent that when we as adults come across a photograph depicting us and our friends aged seven or eight, we are struck by how stupidly young we all appear. Could that really be J— whose collection of Star Wars figures I envied beyond words and with whom I argued over administrative aspects of the Worz

Gummidge Fan Club that we started together? And could that be P—, an older boy who I told my friends had bionic implants and was the subject of a very early crush? And dear Lord, surely that mop-haired taller girl cannot be M—, who my parents said was a bit ‘slow’ and who once showed her front bottom to a queue of us after a French lesson? The curly platinum-haired kid in shorts, who could draw excellent witches and was frequently congratulated on his handwriting, must be me. But we are all little kids there, with the same kid-hair and kid-faces that don’t match with the mental pictures we make of us from memory – here inside my head I realise I have been trying to see older faces of my own age, struggling to depict firmer expressions and sharper lines, to remember us as something we never were (and when I recently met with an old classmate, G—, decades after receiving the slipper for sticking the nib of a dip-pen into his buttock, I didn’t recognise him at all). Old photographs of ourselves are strange, for with them we see that our world really was a child’s world of childish concerns.

Photographs offer the cold stare of limp reality, whereas the smell of pink soap shrinks us down like Alice and ushers us in through a side-door, where we now hate Mr White for shouting at us during football, where we are embarrassed not to know the price of a second-class stamp when Mrs Park asks us and are furious to be sent to the headmistress to be called stupid (and end up getting the slipper again because we are caught lying when we only *pretend* to have reported to the terrifying blazered octogenarian lesbian, and therefore the punishment is increased. I can bring to mind the stinging slap of my plimsoll being brought down angrily on my outstretched hand in an instant; tears rolling down my face not so much from the pain but from the humiliation of having to walk into class that she was giving and *ask* for the slipper; having to explain what I had done to deserve it; removing my regulation grey rubber gym-shoe in front of the silent, fascinated older children who were no doubt excited to be watching the rare treat of a naughty boy getting the worst form of punishment the school could offer; extending my hand palm-up and letting the old monster slam the plimsoll down, hoping that she didn’t catch my fingers, which would hurt the most. I was slipped eleven times at that primary school: mainly for simple insolence, once for the pen-nib incident, once for pushing B— into the frog pond).



Holding the cards, complaining at the resurgence of the memory, that palm throbbed a little now.

The restaurant was split over two levels, and the downstairs was my domain on Thursday nights for that is where diners enjoyed their *digestifs* and the post-dinner entertainment hired for the evening.

I was such entertainment: a jobbing close-up magician based in Bristol, a few years before a luck phone call brought me a TV break and a move away from that green city of artists and therapists and tramps to a grey metropolis of actors and wankers and hedge-fund traders. After performing at one of the owner's other restaurants I had been brought on board at the entertainment-planning stage of the sprawling new high-concept restaurant, and it had become my professional residency. A regular restaurant gig is priceless for a working magician. The clientele were also perfect for me: what the restaurant lacked in cosy corners it found in space for larger groups, so each Thursday I performed a few hours for corporate teams and groups of friends who sometimes booked me for their own private events, and in doing so supplemented my restaurant pay and allowed me to earn a comfortable enough living doing what I loved.

Loved, certainly, but there is an aspect to working as a table-hopper that is deeply excruciating for anyone other than the most repellently unselfconscious of us. I was lucky in that most of the diners expected an entertainer to be in their midst, but approaching a happily chatting group with the offer of magic tricks was a necessary embarrassment with which I never quite made my peace. The experienced table-magician will be sure not to interrupt a meal and will develop his own ways of ingratiating himself with a table of diners. Hopefully, once the other diners realise his presence, and perhaps call him over, his job becomes easier; and he can make sure that certain tricks are interesting enough when viewed from a distance in order to quickly engender a feeling of curiosity in the room and minimise the awkwardness of introducing himself again at the next table. But rarely is it so easy and the potential for self-loathing is enormous. On a good night he might come away feeling like a performing monkey, beckoned hither and thither to impress drunken idiots he would hate to meet under any other circumstance; on a bad night (after a group has politely but firmly expressed its lack of interest upon his approach and others have been clearly only humouring him) he might crawl home hating himself quite considerably – or at least until that night's episode of *Friends*, recorded while he was out and now accompanied by a Highland malt, the chatter of his parakeet and a few chocolate-covered almonds diverts his mind from such heavy concerns.

The potential for self-loathing comes from the unavoidable problem that one is engaging in a childish, fraudulent activity: although it has the capacity to delight and amaze, the performer is also a hair's breadth from being justifiably treated like a silly child. It is, after all, just tricks. Much ups and downs and controversy can be triggered in the magical fraternity by such disgraces as revealing a method of performing another magician's effect ('effect' is the preferred word for 'trick', and comprises the plot that the audience should follow as opposed to the 'method' which explains it), and equally one may feel a quiet pride in using a method one has devised entirely for oneself, as opposed to one taken from a book drawn from the substantial secret library of the magical fraternity (annals that contain some of the most wonderful, obsessive and pointless texts we human beings have produced), but these considerations tend to seem absurd when viewed from a distance. Two old men arguing over bits of rope or who first shoved a card into his pocket in a certain way are the types of issues that can raise the temperature and lead to ungentlemanly behaviour at any magic hang-out anywhere in the world. It is perhaps the oddness and exclusiveness of the magic world that makes issues of perceived status so important to performers. Among fellow professionals, many have a huge reputation that is not reflected in the public arena outside the magic clubs and conventions, and which can lead to the most appalling bitterness. Even performers who enjoy wider success, not allowed to honestly express to their audience the joy of applying curious and unexplored psychology as well as of creating an illusion employing deceptive methods, can be prone to aggrandising themselves to laughable proportions in

circular battle with their own guilty fear of being seen as a fraud.

A peculiar instance of the precariousness of the table-magician's self-imposed status can be seen at the unfortunate moment when a waiter approaches the table during a trick and interrupts the performance. The carefully controlled play of attention and relaxation which the performer has established is thrown into disarray, and, more frustratingly, the suspicion will arise (and remain) that the magician could have done *anything* while everyone else turned to look at the waiter. The up-until-then status-enjoying Svengali must defer to the restaurant employee and will probably freeze, feeling his anticipated climax slipping further away in direct proportion to the length of time it takes the waiter to carry out his task.

Waiting staff must live in a world of frequent freezes. The arrival of a waiter has the same dramatic effect on conversation as the intrusion of a person into a lift already occupied by a nattering couple. There is at the table the curious 'Parmesan Moment' when the most animated chatter enters, sometimes mid-word, a cryogenic phase equal in length to the time it takes the waiter to shave hard cheese on to the plates of the erstwhile vivacious diners. No conversation is too mundane, no babble too banal for it to be suddenly classified as anything less than entirely confidential once the rotograter invades the periphery. If I were a waiter (and I would like to imagine that this idea has already been put into action), I would rotate the utensil as slowly as I could for as long as possible, speeding up perhaps for brief moments here and there just to abate the frustration of the silent parties and keep their annoyance beneath a verbally expressed level. It would be satisfying to think that cooperative staff members might, using discreet stopwatches, time one another attempting to set a record for the longest sustained Parmesan Moment before the party resumes talking, the cheese cube is entirely dispersed or a diner, set to explode, screams for the infuriating process to be curtailed.

The oddness of the reverie that solemnly greets the cheese-bearing waiter is echoed by the strangeness of requesting a napkin and having it brought to the table with disproportionate reverence aboard its own tray, with much of the pomp and silver-service showmanship one might expect to be reserved for the arrival of the entrée. The curious presentation of the napkin is surely not necessitated by hygiene, as the waiter will handle the solitary cloth manually as he places it on the table with a final flourish, but rather by a delight in presentation that makes a white cloth on a tray rather more *special* than a white cloth flopped flaccidly in the hand. This is context; this is pointing the presence of the napkin by putting a clear space around it, rather like a picture, hung in a gallery, looks more special than the same picture propped or hung near other objects that interfere with its sacred periphery. The blurriest and most ill-composed of our personal photographs look quite passable in an album; indeed any one of these incompetent images could look like art if given centre stage on an otherwise empty page. The space around the subject seems to dictate its status (a perhaps counter-intuitive notion given the more familiar sight of celebrities and royalty surrounded by a swarming flurry of bodyguards, press-people and/or fans).

A friend once showed me photographs from his holiday in New York which had been dragged and dropped from a digital library to a virtual album on his computer, after which, following a modest online payment, the album had been printed, bound and sheathed, and sent to my friend in the post. The result was astonishing: these nice but modest family snaps, mounted in what felt like a commercially produced art book, looked like the work of a professional photographer. Here the space around the pictures was not an accidental result of sticking the latter into a shop-bought album, but instead was the product of design, inseparable from the printed and arranged images, and their status was thus raised even further. The same pictures would have seemed far less noteworthy had they been

shown without the framing of each page, and merely been 'gone through' by my friend holding the pile of 4×6s in his hand and transferring individual pictures from front to back in a cyclical sequence immediately identifiable as the holiday-snap-showing action. Or at least immediately identifiable to those of us not brought up having viewed photographs only on a computer.

With the demise of the print photograph (and with the printing-out of sets of digital photographs at least at time of writing, a sentimental throw-back we associate with mothers and the declining classes of the computer-illiterate), we have also lost a particular part of our mimetic repertoire. Skipping from one photograph to another on a screen with a mouse-click does not provide us with the familiar gesture-set peculiar to the enjoyable activity of viewing our snaps and allow us to be transported back to fun or beautiful moments, and thus a modicum of charm is lost from the whole process. Inoffensive activities in which we can find the quality of charm because they involve unique and immediately identifiable actions include:

Riding a bicycle

Here a very particular set of actions is involved, used only when cycling; and given the fact that there are far more effortless modes of transport available to a person who wishes to get from A to B, that set of cycling actions can be seen as peculiar to the point of an almost redundant indulgence. The pedalling action therefore gives this choice of transport mode a kind of quaintness. When bicycles become obsolete, we will have lost a source of charm (a fact to which the following will bear witness to anyone who makes a point of riding one will be seen as an eccentric).

Climbing stairs

Houses of two or more storeys have a particular charm that perfectly lovely bungalows and single storey flats do not. This is in part due to the necessary architectural inclusion of stairs, and the fact that their presence invites a unique and immediately identifiable sequence of actions. A stair-lift is charmless, as sitting is a commonplace posture, and (perhaps literally) bypasses the stair-ness of stairs and therefore their inherent charisma.

Placing a stamp on an envelope

Written communication will become entirely charmless when no unique actions are involved and all communication happens electronically.

Preparing a tube of toothpaste

or other substance for first use by unscrewing the cap, then turning over the cap and screwing it back *on the other way round*, whereupon a pointed cone in the centre of said cap satisfyingly penetrates the small circle of foil covering the mouth of the tube. The minor charm of this activity is heightened by (a) the barely noticeable amount of suspense experienced as one twists the contrary crown towards the foil and awaits the moment of penetration, and (b) the almost completely imperceptible tactile feedback received as that instance is reached and the tiny silver disc is annihilated by the effortless and cruelly disproportionate force of your physical might, channelled into the tiny, rotating, advancing cap.

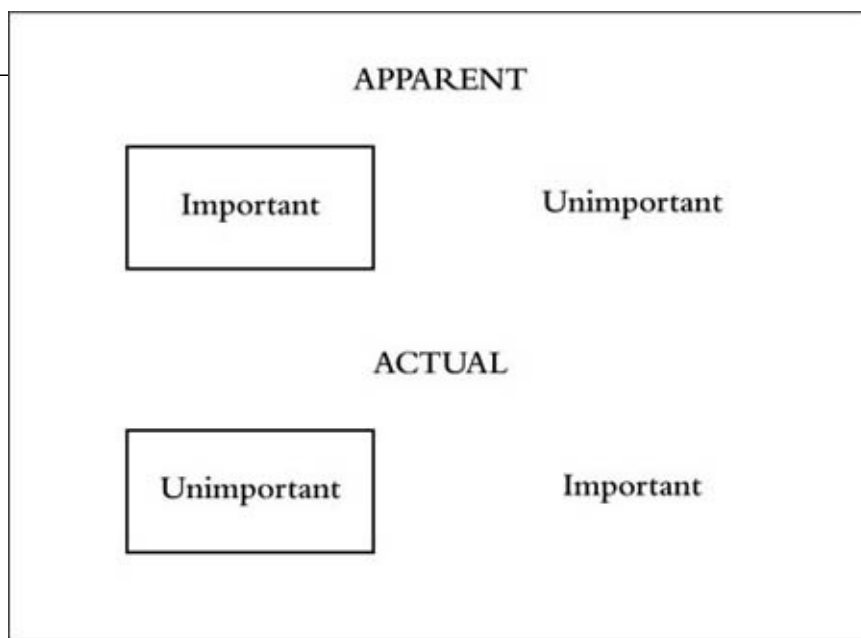
Reading a book

Like a napkin borne with great ceremony upon a tray of unnecessary proportions (to make the diner feel that even his face-swab is deemed sacred by staff lost in fawning wonder at his decision

eat and wipe himself within their walls), a magician at a table will create physical or psychological space around an item he wishes you to treat as important. At the same time, the genuinely important item – the fake coin, the special card, the hand that conceals a palmed card – is apparently ignored by the deceiver and where possible pushed to the side among clutter, as he knows that if he does not give it status you will probably not think to do so yourself.

Perhaps the magician wishes to create the illusion of a knife passing through a twenty-pound note and will achieve this by using an ordinary note but a special knife bought from a magic-shop or built to his own design, which creates the illusion of penetration but in fact causes no harm to the note through which it apparently moves. He could borrow the note to prove to all that it is unfaked, but the better magician might, after moving aside cutlery and crockery from the table, purposefully cause suspicion over this innocent element by producing the twenty from a special pocket in his own wall (a special pocket is the note's own special space), and then placing it flat on the table, the clear space around it signifying its importance. The knife, meanwhile, has been casually sneaked in among the other cutlery as he swept the objects aside, and lies surrounded by table objects, denied the space, the display and therefore the significance bestowed upon the entirely blameless currency. Keeping his gaze fixed upon the money as he picks it up, the magician takes the knife with his other hand (as if there were any suitably pointed object from the table) and thrusts it through the note. He appears to withdraw the blade, and the small audience see that the paper has remained unharmed. They are incredulous, and stare at where the hole should be in the centre of the note. The magician keeps the attention focused by slowly placing the twenty again on the table before them, returning it to the space he has cleared for it, a designated table-top performance area from which it would be rude for the spectators to remove the money they wish to examine. The cleared region around it has made it the primary object of focus, and without saying anything the performer has allowed all their suspicion to be directed towards an innocent item.

In the same gesture of placing the note back on the cleared table area, the knife has been replaced to the side, and without pause the magician's hand casually slides across and hovers above a different, similar, nearby knife. This small move is missed as the note is the centre of attention and the spectators are waiting to be allowed to examine what they now suspect is a special note. He then gestures for the money to be examined, which they grab willingly; and as he sits back, he lifts the second, guiltless knife, which is under his hand, and places it in the space previously occupied by the note. So now he is using the same space to give a (but not actually *the*) knife importance, and moments later when they realise that there is nothing for them to find in the note, they turn their attention to what they presume is the knife used in the trick, snatch it, and examine it thoroughly to their avail. A trick knife might be the rather disappointing physical solution to the beautiful illusion, but without the magician's deft use of space to focus attention and manipulate status at a wordless level, it would be far less likely to create an effective mystery.



The pristine, white-linen-covered tables that constituted this restaurant work area and which caused my heart to hang heavy were echoed by the coffee-ringed, cheap pine or melamine café tables that populated much of my playtime. The slopes of Bristol host a thriving café industry, and like an arty type with his days free, I was usually sat in one of them. Something in the limp, camp, dandy aesthetic of the tea-sipping flâneur appealed, and still does, although the dandyish teahouses of my graduate years have given way to the Starbucks of my professional period. There is a particular joy well worth mentioning, of having one's favourite table in such regular haunts. Today, though my time is largely filled with work, I still seek out and jealously guard favourite tables in favourite cafés around London. I hope it does not sound too preposterously flaccid to say that there is a singular bliss in settling down at one of them for a day's reading or writing at the start of a free weekend. Such pleasures I find self-affirming and oddly moving, most probably because they bring with them a wash of nostalgia for those years in Bristol.

Like most people, I prefer tables by the window, and my favourite local table is in a modest Starbucks overlooking a high street from just around a corner in a side-alley. This fortuitous positioning offers both a bright and busy view of passing London life and a discreet vantage point that means only those few people using the side-alley would be aware of me at all. The fact that I love the bustling backdrop when reading or working in such a place confirms for me that I am very much a city rather than a country type; to gaze out of one's window at a lonely pastoral panorama would be to deny oneself the joy of periodically observing the masses and would not provide the regular intermittent distractions necessary to keep working for an afternoon. From inside a warm café through a picture window, we can view pedestrians across the road for far longer than they think (they may be aware of being seen from inside shops and eating-houses on *their* side of the road, but rarely do they consider whether they are being watched from the other). Our eyes can settle unsympathetically upon walloping fatties and then dart to crack-heads and on to toddlers and well-dressed elderly couples. We can judge them all as clichéd and ridiculous or feel a warm glow of love for them, depending on our sentimental state at the time or what we are reading. Alternatively, we can play the private game of if-you-had-to-shag-one-person-on-the-street-who-would-it-be. All options are open to us.

Meanwhile, if we wish, we can enjoy a direct and more scrupulous scrutiny of fellow patrons seated inside the café and the delightful tension that comes from knowing that they might look up and

catch our eye at any time. In the café, we can observe more delicate and private behaviours: we can see with what combination of sugars, sugar-substitutes and/or flavoured dustings people prefer to drink their coffee; how they deal with becoming entangled inelegantly as they try to remove coat, scarf and headphones in the wrong sequence and suddenly become self-conscious; what exaggerated expression of exhaustion rolls across their face after reaching their table and realising that they have forgotten to take a stirrer from the dustings bar, and, knowing that they must now cross the length of the café to fetch one (in front of everyone else who has just watched them pimp their beverage with assorted peripherals at the very bar they must now return to), the signal they provide that their own selves find their return just as annoying as it must appear untoward or amusing to the other patrons.

This tutting, eye-rolling signal is related to the gesture we might make on the street after realising that we are walking in the wrong direction from that where we wish to head. Wanting to turn round but fearing the attention we will attract by breaking rank and turning one-hundred-and-eighty degrees for no clear reason, we decide to use a cartoon-gesture that denotes 'Having Forgotten Something': we raise a forefinger slightly to make a minimal 'A-ha!' point, raise our eyebrows, stop in our tracks and provide a visible motivation for the very public rotation we are about to perform. 'Look,' we imagine people will think, 'that guy has realised he has forgotten something; how sensible that he should not turn round and attend to it. What sound judgement on his part.' If we were alone, we would not make that cartoon-gesture of sudden remembrance.

I like to catch myself and others acting out such brief self-conscious thought processes because they remind me of what I have come to think of as 'In a Play' moments: reliable actions or encounters only in actors on stage and never in the real life they are failing at that moment to depict convincingly. Here are some 'In a Play' moments I have mentally collected:

Sitting like a king in a play

Kings in Shakespeare relax back in their chairs and slouch to one side, allowing the hand on the side which they are leaning to be comfortably raised to the face for beard-stroking or waving things away.

Sitting like a prince in a play

A prince, on the other hand, sits jauntily forward in the chair, legs spryly and widely apart, leaning to one side as if telling an imagined neighbour something in confidence, with an elbow resting dashing on the knee towards the side he is leaning.

Entering a room for the first time in a play

Here, one should clearly look at each of the walls and especially the imagined ceiling, twisting the head up and round to take in the whole of the space with a gentle, wide-eyed display of wonder.

Approaching a lover in a play

Lovers approaching each other, especially if singing, should lean back a little and extend both arms forward at an angle of forty-five degrees to the floor, with hands extended. The lady's palms should be facing down, the man's up, so that when they meet they can clasp their hands together in one bundle and bring them up to the centre of the chest and gaze unconvincingly into each other's eyes.

Looking at something far away in a play

When checking if one can see a person or thing that is so far away that it resides well off-stage, the

sense of distance is magically created by looking into the wings and stepping up on to the ball of the forward foot as if one were looking over a fence that was a little higher than one's eye-level. —

Telling a story in a play

When person A describes an event to person B, both A and B should face forward so that A can move his hand to paint a picture in the air and B can follow that hand in order to build the same mental picture for himself. B should be engrossed in the gestures made by A, and if at any point A wishes to ensure that B is entirely infected with his own enthusiasm for the tale, A can simply bat B on the cheek with the back of his hand. I have to say that while I have never known human beings to communicate in this way, or in any that resembles it, this is both one of the most bizarre and yet blindly accepted 'a Play' moments of which I am aware.

Flirting in a play

If you are a lady wishing to secure the attention of a handsome but shy male, a surefire route is to clasp your hands behind your back and walk round him in that coquettish, pointy-toed, one-foot-directly-in-front-of-the-other, shoulder-swinging style that handsome but shy men read as sexually attractive (as opposed to a sign of mental illness). If this fails, laugh a lot over your shoulder, pull his tie a little or do walky-fingers up the front of his shirt before laughing again and running off. No handsome but shy male should be able to resist.

Delivering sexual innuendos in a play

An audience at a Shakespeare play are not usually a clever lot, so it is best to clarify any sexual double-entendre in a line by thrusting the right forearm into the air (like a phallus) while gripping the bicep with the left hand. Characters who use sexual innuendo are usually fun-loving and spirited, and tend to say things that are 'tongue-in-cheek'. This can be clarified by actually poking the tongue clearly into the cheek just after a line has been delivered.

Experiencing loss of a loved one in Shakespeare's time in a play

Sixteenth-century ladies would always place one forearm across the stomach and bend forward extending the other arm before them in the gesture of 'I'm trying to reach but simultaneously stopping myself with my own arm' that we so commonly associate with loss.

Noticing people when wandering outdoors in a play

When approaching people on a beach or in a forest, do not notice them until you are close enough to be seen on stage yourself. Even though you would have seen them from miles off, it is best to say you were being startled by their presence until very close.

Being a lady working in a guest-house in a play

By the end of the day you have had enough of hard work and time-wasters, so it would be correct to slam a pitcher down on the table and sigh loudly into an uncomfortably lopsided both-hands-on-hip position to let us know that. If you are particularly salt-of-the-earth, you can certainly take the towel used for wiping the table clean and throw it heartily over the shoulder, before standing like that to show your rustic exhaustion, just like in real life.

Squaring the cards in my hands, and then rotating the deck to enjoy the cool texture of their flushed edges, I scanned the wide sweep of the restaurant interior to locate a table appropriate to approach.

fresh wave of reluctance twisted through my gut at the thought of interrupting happily chatting groups or risking a dead atmosphere at a quiet table. In the restaurant's toilet I had assembled a few magic aids among and under my clothing that I would use later in the evening. It was a comfort to think that all over the world, close-up magicians at the top of their game had to find moments to lock themselves in cubicles and sort out their pockets while peering into a toilet bowl. This is the wonderful, sad human reality behind the mystery of much of magic. The hobbyist conjuror who suddenly produces a bottle of champagne from a handkerchief for his friends has been carrying that bottle around all evening, cold and wet and heavy against his thigh, and while keeping up a pretence of conversation has been thinking of little other than when there might be a suitable moment to do his trick and rid himself of the weight that pulls him down on one side. For the professional and the amateur, the toilet cubicle is the only place to hide, perhaps several times an evening, to ensure that the more fiddly tricks are all set up. Given that some tricks demand apparatus to be worn under the clothes, it is a common and humbling thing to be stood in the disabled toilet/storage-room, velvet trousers around one's ankles, trying to feed near-invisible thread into some hidden mechanism for the eighth time, angry and impatient; and easy to understand why magicians tend to pretend to be more important than they really are.

And for now I had to pretend. By holding the deck with pressure from my right thumb and ring finger at diagonally opposed corners and my forefinger curled on top, I sprang the cards into my left palm and stepped out of the gloom to begin a stroll around the restaurant floor – a promenade designed to achieve two separate but important aims:

1. Draw attention to myself as a magician.
2. Stall.

I could meander like this, building up the courage to approach a table, for a very long time.

The restaurant, converted from one of the many warehouses around the dock area of Bristol, was stylishly decorated with a North African theme: a grey flagstone floor and warm, rough, orange walls formed a backdrop to Byzantine fixtures and heavy stone-topped tables covered with white cloths. It combined the grand visual splendour appropriate for a restaurant of its calibre with the ethnic affectation adopted by the white middle classes who were evidently feeling guilty about being white and middle class during the nineties.* As an undergraduate at that time, I had seen the first 'ethnic' trinkets appear in student shops in Bristol, and start to spread and flourish as art students with stupid hats and impressionist postcards looked to decorate their rooms and find places to stash their stash and stick their sticks of heady incense. Soon, stalls dedicated to naively fashioned fish and boxes made of fret-worked dark wood and brass filled the harbour walkways and offered all ages of arty, velvet people a hand-carved opportunity to create a Moroccan souk in their own rented accommodation. Being such a person, I bought these things enthusiastically; I even asked my Aunty Jan, visiting for the day, to buy me a large, colourful wooden fish for my twenty-first birthday present. Now, a couple of decades later, the fringe appeal has dwindled and 'ethnic' is the received term for a style of interior decor available at John Lewis for home delivery. And how charming to imagine those impoverished workers making cabinets and towers for our extensive DVD and CD collections – really quite touching.

I had begun my card-springing/strolling action by the bar; now I allowed it to take me in between the babbling, noisy tables. I looked for signs of friendliness and of possible hostility from the guests.

sipping at their brandies and coffees. This was a preferable set-up to working tables when people were having a full dinner: the team behind the restaurant had, thankfully, decided to restrict entertainment to the relaxed ground floor, and offer an uninterrupted main course and dessert upstairs.

Understandably, responses to a magician can be hostile. I am tempted to think that the responsibility for this should generally lie with the magician in question, but clearly, when an entertainer at your table is far from what you were hoping for during a romantic meal out, you'd be justifiably surprised to be bothered even if the performer was rather good. Once, and only once, I performed a card trick that involved a card disappearing from the deck and appearing in a lady's zipped-up handbag under her chair. The woman in question, far from being enchanted by the impossibility, immediately accused me of having had my hand in her bag without her consent. There was no answer to this, certainly no way of pretending that I had not violated that privacy, despite the fact that the bag appeared to have been inaccessible to me. Furthermore, the same witless witch then decided that twenty pounds had gone missing from her purse (the purse, of course, had been kept in the bag), and insisted to the restaurant that I had stolen it. All this on the first night I had been booked to appear in that particular restaurant. The second week at the restaurant brought a customer complaining that I had damaged his watch during a trick in which I had caused it to stop on command. This was a more likely assertion. It was a miserable start.

Quite commonly, a man dining with women will respond with hostility to a magician's approach as the latter is seen as a threat to the former's role as alpha male of his group. This will be the man who interrupts the magic with sarcastic comments, until eventually shushed into submission by his friends, which makes him sulk. Sat back, arms folded, refusing to be impressed, he becomes the child of the group and must be handled as one. The most professional response by the magician is to direct the performance to make this individual look good: this man can be made to correctly divine cards against all odds, and the magician can position himself as a clear non-threat. My own response was rarely as honourable. I would compliment him on his jacket and steal his wallet while making a point of feeling the cloth. On a good day I would return to the table and purposefully lose a bet to this same customer, and while he gloated I'd hand him his winnings, which he did not know had come from his own wallet. He might not search for his wallet to put the money away for some time, and the longer it took before he realised I must have it, the better. On a bad day, if the individual in question was just intolerable, I would silently drag his wallet under the table across a very powerful magnet I had strapped to my knee for other purposes and in doing so wipe all his credit cards, before returning the wallet with its useless plastic invisibly to his pocket.

A still unwelcome though well-meant response from a family is to have the adults turn to the child and say, 'Look, a magician!' Children's magicians form a thankless band of their own in the world of magic, and unless he is a brightly jacketed, horn-carrying member of that dedicated rank and file, and has so far managed to circumvent police arrest, the chances of a magician being able to competently perform anything for a child are minimal. Children are the worst audience for grown-up conjuring: the knowledge of interpersonal psychology held by the performer which is so important for the success of the tricks is wasted upon the very young, who have not learnt to respond automatically to social cues. Relax and ask an adult a question during a trick and he will look you in the eye; do the same with a child and he would have no compunction about ignoring the query and grabbing the prop from your hand to inspect them.

In the same way that the diners, some of whom were now looking over at me, were making snide (and, I always presumed, somewhat unfavourable) judgements about me, I was engaged in similar ac-

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