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The  
Secret  
Science  
of Magic

Melissa Keil

  
PEACHTREE  
ATLANTA



*No performer should attempt to bite off red-hot iron  
unless he has a good set of teeth.*

—Harry Houdini

The greatest card trick in history is known by many names. Sometimes it's called Topping the Deck; sometimes, The Ambitious Card. But most magicians know it as The Trick that Fooled Houdini.

See, the self-proclaimed World's Greatest Magician was so convinced of his own awesomeness that he issued an open challenge to his fellow magicians: show him any trick, three times in a row, and he'd tell you how it was done. Houdini really believed there was nothing in the world he couldn't explain, no illusion he couldn't deduce.

It's possible that Houdini was a bit of a git. And he was clearly unfamiliar with the concept of a giant, karmic arse-kicking.

Dai Vernon, one of the best cardsmen of all time, took up the challenge. He asked Houdini to pick a card from a deck and to write his initials on the chosen card. He slipped it into the middle of the pack. Vernon snapped his fingers and—bammo!—Houdini's card appeared on top of the deck. Houdini made Vernon repeat the trick again. And again.

Vernon repeated it *seven times*, but Houdini could not explain how it was done. Needless to say, the World's Greatest Magician was pissed. Houdini may have aced jailbreaks and underwater escapes, but he never did learn Vernon's trick.

I figured it out when I was ten.

Now, I would never claim this makes me a better magician than Houdini—that would make me sound like a tool. But still, pulling off something the master magician couldn't do is a pretty nice boost to a guy's ego. And anyway, with practice, the Ambitious Card isn't even that hard. Like all my favorite tricks, its brilliance lies precisely in its simplicity: a majorly clever sleight of hand, and some skill in palming the cards.

Sleight of hand is critical to most illusions. Misdirection, of course, is vital. But the fundamental key to all magic is simple:

Timing.

Without careful, precise timing, a magician will end up dropping his cards, or, you know, sawing his own legs off. I cannot stress this enough—the most important tool in a magician's bag is timing.

Well, timing—and an audience. A willing participant, who chooses to follow your escapades, is kinda crucial as well.

I risk a glance at the front of the Biology lab. Mr. Grayson is attempting to load a YouTube clip—I assume it's bio-related—onto the smart board. He's trying to look convincing, but the panicked thumping on his laptop betrays the fact that Grayson is about as tech savvy as a Franciscan monk. The lab is airless and dim. The class is alternating between somnambulism and unashamed sleep.

Except for one person.

*Sophia.*

I drop my eyes to my desk.

Sophia. Known to her best friend, the sweet-faced Elsie Nayer, as “Rey.” Known to our teachers, who address her with a combination of apprehension and awe, as “Ms. Reyhart.” Known to everyone else as “The Genius.”

Sophia is staring at the spinning wheel of death on the smart board screen. She’s tapping her pencil impatiently against her lip, her body folded over as though she’s trying to vanish inside her own skin.

In a moment you’ll hear her mention me. Pay attention, ’cause if you blink you might miss it.

I believe she will shortly describe me as “that dipshit who’s always smiling at himself.”

This is not ideal. But, to be fair, not *entirely* surprising. Sophia glances over her shoulder, black hair bouncing. Her sharp eyes survey the room, passing over me with what I perceive as the faintest hint of distaste.

So, yeah. I’m not exactly Mr. Popular. A guy who spends his spare time installed like a fern in the History stacks of the library does not endear himself to other human life-forms. And maybe I do tend to “loom like a gimp,” as I once heard some rando jock-head say. I thought that was a bit unfair. It’s hard not to loom when you’re six foot three and built like a praying mantis.

Oh. And I *may* have recently been spotted at the train station while wearing a cape.

What can I say? My timing isn’t always stupendous.

I sneak another peek at her lab station.

Significant moments meld to your memories in weird, mysterious ways. I remember the assembly was in spring, because the school was canopied by leaves, colossal red maples that seemed to block out the sky. I remember an army of year sevens jammed into the Arts building on the far side of the East Lawn, a hundred gray uniforms cold and damp from drizzle. I clearly remember being herded into a wobbly seat behind some dude who'd won a prize for writing to the Queen—and beside the girl with the thick black ponytail whom I'd been observing from a distance for the better part of a year.

The girl in whom I recognized a familiar skin-shifty restlessness, like her molecules were bouncing between different dimensions.

I remember nothing about the parade of speeches onstage. All I remember is Sophia, sitting aloof and straight beside me. Her eyes were focused on the page she held, which was covered with scrawls like some incomprehensible secret language; the answer to a national math prize that had our teachers falling over themselves.

I remember clearing my throat, an involuntary sound that I'm pretty sure came out as a whimper.

She looked up from her paper, dark eyes unblinking, for just a moment.

And despite the fact that I'd barely spoken a single word aloud that year, a rusty voice bubbled out of my mouth.

“What do you see?”

She looked down again, fingers fluttering reverently over

her equation. She smiled, without glancing up. And she said one word—the only word Sophia Reyhart has spoken to me in almost five years:

“Magic.”

And I knew my life was supposed to have her in it.

I would bet money that Sophia doesn't remember that moment. I would stake my collection of first-edition Raymond E. Feists, or my super-rare vintage Russian marine watch, still in its box, on the fact that she doesn't see me as anything other than a looming, too-smiley, weird guy—if she ever thinks about me at all. This is okay.

I tap my hand against the deck in my pocket.

I will avoid the obvious pun about playing my cards right.

But, as I have mentioned, timing is everything.

And I think it's almost, just about, time.

