

This summer, I spent a week driving from New York to Alabama to visit the birthplace of Helen Keller, whose autobiography I had been reading. On the way down, my car broke. I had to stay a night in Harrisonburg, Virginia, waiting for an auto repair shop to re-open the next morning. This incident, in itself, is unremarkable, as is the fact that while mechanics were installing new spark plugs the next day, I walked to a strip mall where I ordered a cup of coffee from a small café. I sat outside with my coffee at a table under an awning, facing an ordinary, almost empty parking lot. A single car idled nearby. After a few minutes, the idling disturbed me. Why sit in limbo so long, wasting fuel? Why not park the car, or else drive off? I noticed the vehicle's front plate read G-R-8 T-R-I-X, and I could see through to the rear window where a transparent sticker above the brake light read Got Magic? like those notorious milk ads. There was a man in the driver's seat. He was wearing dark glasses. I supposed he must be a magician.

For anyone inclined to assign meaning to slightly unusual occurrences, a magician sitting idly and inexplicably in the parking lot of a tiny, unremarkable town in Virginia is remarkable. But for the stubbornly superstitious, a magician sitting idly and inexplicably in the parking lot of a tiny, unremarkable town in Virginia practically screams cosmic significance. As I happened to be writing a script for a magician that very day, I found the din unbearable. I finished my coffee, approached the oracle, and knocked on the window. After a moment's hesitation, during which the driver must've assessed odds that I planned to remind him of the rate at which the planet's glaciers and ice caps are becoming the planet's rivers and oceans, he lowered the glass an inch. I asked, "Are you a magician?" His shoulders dropped ever so slightly. He half-smiled, lowered the glass further and said, "I prefer the term *il-lu-sion-ist*." He moved his mouth in an exaggerated way, pronouncing the word slowly, as if to imply something other than the obvious, though whatever he could mean by this micro-drama of enunciation eluded me.

I explained that I was working on a script, and we proceeded to speak for the next half hour or so about his act. I asked how he got into the trade and what it takes to be a successful *il-lu-sion-ist*. He offered to demonstrate a beginner's trick. First, he drew my attention to a soft foam rubber ball, one foam rubber ball, about the size and color of a run-of-the-mill clown nose. He induced me to verify that I saw one clown nose only. I did. He then magically produced a second foam nose in his other hand. We were now dealing with two soft, red, foam rubber balls. He placed one of these into my palm and closed my fingers around it to form a fist. I held the foam tightly while he continued talking about the fact that he had only one soft, foam rubber ball now. As he spoke, he directed my eyes to the visible foam ball in his one hand, while he made some magical gestures in the vicinity of my fist with his other hand. When I opened my palm, I was indeed holding two soft, red, foam rubber balls, aka clown noses. Ta da. He removed the booty from my hand and repeated the trick, this time holding up two of our grand total of three foam rubber balls in one hand for me to inventory. Magician: "Count these two please." Me: "One, two – yep, just two right there." He placed the pair of magical noses into my palm and re-formed my fist. By the time I opened my hand again, these two had been transformed into three for a grander total of four soft, red, foam rubber clown nose balls. The trick was utterly unconvincing. I knew he had placed two objects into my hand on the first go and three on the

second, but I assured him that I could imagine — had we not been discussing sleight of hand all along, or had I perhaps been an audience to the trick instead of its subject — I trailed off. After a slightly awkward but congenial silence, I asked him what makes people believe in something they know to be patently false. He replied, "Once people are involved in a story, they want to believe, so they do, even if what they're seeing on stage is preposterous." This sounded more like the message I was destined to receive. "You can buy magic tricks at the store," he continued. "Sleight of hand is a narrative art." When I reached Keller's birthplace a few days later, I discovered that the grounds behind the house are dedicated to a permanent theater set where the story of her early life is regularly re-enacted. The set occupies more real estate than the actual house it represents, just a few feet away.

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