

## **The Magician on the Footbridge (2011)**

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**Translated from the Chinese by Dave Haysom**

“Business savvy just doesn’t run in the blood,” my mum often says – in which there lies a veiled criticism of me, and a hint of regret. But no such regret existed until after I turned ten years old, because up until then I was known to be quite the businessman.

My family ran a shoe shop, but to have some kid addressing the customers – with lines like “you look great in this pair”; “it’s real leather”; “I’ll make it a bit cheaper, just for you”; “gosh, I really can’t go any lower than that” – would hardly have come across as very authentic, or persuasive. But one year, my mum came up with an idea. You can go to the footbridge, she said, and sell laces and insoles. People are bound to buy them if they see a kid like you. The innocent face of a child is one of life’s ways of tricking us into having the courage to carry on living – this was something I only came to understand much later.

The market had eight buildings in all, named ‘Loyalty’, ‘Filiality’, ‘Benevolence’, ‘Love’, ‘Trust’, ‘Justice’, ‘Harmony’, and ‘Peace’. We lived between Love and Trust. There was a footbridge from Love to Trust, and another to Benevolence. I preferred the footbridge between Love and Trust, because it was longer. The far end was in Ximending, and on the bridge itself there were peddlers selling everything: selling ice cream, selling children’s clothing, selling baked seed cakes, selling Wacoal brand underwear, selling goldfish, turtles – I even saw someone selling water monks (a kind of blue crab). The police sometimes came to harass the peddlers, but there were just too many routes down from the footbridge – the peddlers often bundled up their stuff and nipped off to the toilet before returning. Never mind the fact that the police usually came slowly along, as though they thought the peddlers were all suffering from gout and incapable of running away.

Early that morning my aunt took me up onto the footbridge, gave me a rice ball, and left. I tied the laces in pairs on the footbridge railings, and as soon as the wind picked up they fluttered to and fro. I sat on the little stool my aunt had brought with her, and started lining up the insoles in pair of lefts and rights. I put the ‘noisy skins’ at the very front, because they were the most expensive – one pair cost thirty bucks. My mum said the insoles we called noisy skins were made from pigskin – they had a pungent kind of aroma. If you layered several of them together, they produced this shuai-shuai-shuai noise when you walked around – hence the name. Wow – the skin of a dead pig could still make noise!

Ha, I sure did love selling insoles on the footbridge.

Opposite mine was the stall of a man with greasy hair, a jacket with the collar turned up, grey trousers, and paratrooper boots that were neither zipped nor laced up. Paratrooper boots are those tall boots with lots of lace holes – doing up all the laces on boots so tall was the fiddliest thing in the world. Eventually someone had invented a zip that could replace the laces. I heard this was a dream come true for all the soldiers in Taiwan – from then on, every squaddie could get out of

bed in the morning much more quickly. Back then we had at least ten squaddies coming in every day to buy zips for paratrooper boots. Maybe, I thought, I could get my mum to give me some paratrooper boot zips to sell tomorrow – sales would surely be good.

This man had drawn an arc on the ground in chalk, spread out a black cloth, and put out all the things he was selling according to their type. At first I didn't know what kind of thing he was selling: there were playing cards, linked rings, strange notebooks... My aunt said he was a magic trick salesman. Wow – a guy selling magic tricks! My stall was opposite a guy selling magic tricks!

“Actually no – I am a magician.” This was how he introduced himself. I once asked where his goods were sold wholesale, and he said, “all of this magic is real.” He looked at me with those eyes of his – so skewed they could look in different directions, like a lizard – and I shivered.

The magician didn't wear a tailcoat like the magicians on TV, and he didn't have a top hat either. Every day he just wore that woolen jacket with the collar turned up, grey trousers, and filthy paratrooper boots. Next time, I thought, I'd recommend him some liquid boot polish – one wipe of that and they'd be gleaming. His face was perhaps a little squareish, perhaps a little longish. Neither tall nor short, he looked like the kind of person who'd forgotten what laughter was. Once the magician entered a crowd, there was nothing to distinguish him from anyone else – that was the kind of inconspicuous magician he was. Nothing, that is, apart from that pair of eyes, and that pair of zipless paratrooper boots.

The magician put on a show about once an hour. I was so lucky, sitting opposite him selling insoles. The magic he did most often involved dice, playing cards, linked rings – tricks of that sort. Thinking of it now, they all seem so ordinary – so ordinary there were no real grounds for calling him a magician. But back then they were nothing short of miraculous, as far as I was concerned. It felt just the same as it did later when I saw Vivian Leigh for the first time. This was why I hankered after those magic tricks, in just the same way as I'd always wanted to raise a sparrow.

There was one trick he did with six dice. Surrounded by a large audience, he loaded the dice one by one into the little box with a casual manner. Once he had shut this little box, one shake – and the magician revealed the smile he only ever seemed to reveal when performing – and when he opened the box they had turned to six, six, six, six, six, and six.

It seemed like the number was at the discretion of the magician. He could ask for the birthday of a member of the crowd who was enjoying the spectacle, for instance – then, as though it were nothing, while continuing to speak – produce the digits of the date on which they were born. Sometimes one shake would be all it took, while at other times he'd only stop after shaking it so many times it made me dizzy, but whenever he opened the box the numbers were spot on every time.

When he was doing magic his eyes would sometimes gleam; he was still the magician in the woolen jacket with the collar turned up, in those grey trousers and filthy paratrooper boots – but in that instant his whole person was glowing, as though after taking in a breath of air he was then

able to bring all the forces of light and gravity to bear on that little chalk circle in which he stood. As well as performing he was also selling tricks. The time came when I could no longer resist the temptation to use money from the insole sales to buy one of the tricks. The first one I got was ‘the dice of mystery’.

After buying a trick from the magician he’d take you to one side and give you a blank piece of white paper along with the trick. “Take it home,” he said, “soak it in water and then dry it out – then you’ll be able to see the secret of the magic.” I spent half the night carefully soaking the paper, and then – having used my mum’s hairdryer to blow it dry – spent the rest of the night carefully studying. There were pictures on the paper as well as words – by the looks of it the magician had written and drawn them all by hand. So, that’s the way it is, I thought to myself as I read the words. That’s the way it is. At that moment I thought I understood all the most profound secrets of the magician – just like I thought I knew what love was when I was eleven-years-old and had a secret crush on a classmate.

I practiced furtively, in private. The first time I performed the dice trick in front of my big brother I was so nervous I repeatedly dropped the dice, with the result that before I’d even finished loading them into the box he had seen through the trick.

“You turn the dice face you want towards yourself, right?” he said with a look of disdain.

“Right.” I was devastated: he was right. Nothing could be more painful than to be rumbled before the magic had even happened – it was like having your whole life foretold before you’d even grown up. I felt a bitter hatred towards both fortune-tellers and those who revealed the secrets of other people’s magic. The key to the trick lay not in the dice themselves but in the box, which had a particular shape to it. You put the number you wanted against the side closest to you, and then it fell to the strength of your wrist to make them turn ninety degrees, so that side was now facing upwards. That’s all there was to it.

“You stole money – I’m telling mum,” my brother said. I had indeed ‘appropriated’ money from selling insoles, and once my brother had made this discovery, I had no option but to give the magic dice to him.

Damn, but that was one overpriced secret – no way was it worth sixty bucks! I’d gone to the trouble of tricking my mum for a whole week before I was able to skim sixty bucks from the insole earnings.

But the funny thing was that even though I’d discovered there was no magic to it, whenever I saw the magician clap his hands and yell, I let go of all those thoughts of being deceived. Unable to control myself, I was lured in by the magician’s trickery again and again. Again and again I bought those tricks which – back then – seemed impossibly precious. Like the empty matchbox that could become a full matchbox; the picture book whose black outlines suddenly filled with colour; the ball-point pen that drew in as many colours as a rainbow; the mysteriously pliable copper coin... Every trick was the same: in the instant it was being performed by the magician, my desire to learn it for myself was irrepressible – but once I’d spent the money, bought it and taken it home, after soaking that paper in water and waiting for the words to emerge, the magic

stopped being a mystery and became a con. It was only much later that I discovered the same reasoning applies to more or less everything.

With my lack of practice on top of that, those magic tricks were pretty much a disaster for me – I was always being laughed at by relatives or neighbours.

“You’ve been had, idiot child.” When my mum found out I’d stolen money to buy magic tricks, she gave me a slap around the head.

What was really hard to endure was the fact that Burble, from the tailor’s; the utility repairman from Justice block’s kid, Blowhard; and Ah Kai from the wonton noodle shop – all of them had bought the same tricks. I wasn’t the least bit angry about being cheated of money – I was confident I just needed a bit more practice – but the feeling that everyone seemed to have their hands on that secret paper was truly unbearable. Several times I was tempted to give the magician a piece of my mind, but I only ever dared vent my anger in my mother’s presence – irritating her to the point where she could stand it no longer, and turned around to give me another slap.

“You spent your stolen money on worthless trinkets, and still you have the cheek to complain?”

Interest in the magician eventually began to dwindle. This was inevitable – passers-by might browse his stall, but all the children in the area had already bought all the tricks. The children who had bought them tried at first to prevent their neighbours and classmates doing likewise by telling them it was all fake, but everyone bought them eventually. There are some things you have to try for yourself before you can know the feeling of being cheated, right?

The magician had also noticed this state of affairs, and he knew he had to create something new for these children to talk about. When I was at work one day, I saw him take a book out of a square valise, and when he opened it up, there was something tucked inside – something black, something that had been cut out of paper, something no larger than a grown-up’s little finger – and this something was a little person.

He put this little black man on the ground, and within the big circle surrounding his stall he used yellow chalk to draw another circle about the size of a fan, before closing his eyes and muttering an incantation. The little black man suddenly shook from side to side, and – as though he’d just woken up – rose to his feet. At first the passers-by were just hurrying past, but for some reason – as though they heard the little black man’s silent summons – they were unable to stop themselves turning back for a look, and once they discovered the little black man on the ground, their footsteps unconsciously slowed to a halt.

I truly did love selling insoles on the footbridge. The little black man leapt and danced in a bumbling sort of way, dashing this way and that in time with the magician’s singing, chanting voice. Although somewhat clumsy, his movements were very endearing – it was like he was reluctant to exert himself too much for fear of tearing himself apart. Paper was not made for sudden movements, after all. I began to fret on behalf of the little black man – if he were to take part in gym class he would surely find himself in mortal peril.

I gradually worked out that the scope of the little black man's activity was limited to the confines of that yellow circle – he could only be within that circle. Were anyone to try and touch the little black man, the magician would stop their hand with a loud and threatening cry, saying, “those who touch him will suffer misfortune, but those who watch him dance will have good luck.” And the little black man didn't look like he wanted to be touched – if anyone came near he would scuttle back to the magician's heel.

Once everyone had been drawn in by the little black man, the magician would begin his routine. The tricks were the same old thing: the mysterious dice; the matchbox that produced matches; the picture book that coloured itself in with a riffle of its pages; the pencil that produced rainbow colours with each stroke; the copper coin you could squeeze between a thumb and forefinger... For some reason the things that hadn't been selling well before were now being snapped up, and the crowd began to appreciate the magician's tricks once more. And then, one by one, he'd take each customer to one side, and one by one give them the blank piece of paper. I had seen all these white pieces of paper – could recite them from memory – but for some stupid reason I still somehow ended up buying another set of magic dice.

At this point the little black man always knew he belonged within the chalk circle. What with his having no eyes, I guessed the little black man couldn't actually see it. That little black man who couldn't see, slowly pacing around that little yellow circle, looked as though he had something on his mind.

The magician's little black man began to grow famous on the footbridge. Now it was not just the children from the market, but all the children from our primary school who came to the footbridge; the worker crowd on their way to Chongqing South Street; the peddlers from Ximending – even the military police from over the road, and the girls from the hairdressers – they all made the trip to the footbridge to see the magician's little black man. The little black man was still a little shy – he danced that little black man dance of his in a slightly clumsy way, and then bent his paper back to bow, waving his paper arms in greeting to the crowd. I was completely entranced by him – every day I looked forward to seeing the little black man's dance so much I sometimes forgot to sell any insoles or laces. The laces tied to the railings, fluttering about in the wind – when I picture it, even now, I'm struck by the beauty of the sight.

Once I had bought all of the magician's tricks we gradually got to know one another. When he bought fried dumplings he'd sometimes give me a few, and sometimes when my mum brought back buttered pastries from gran's hometown in Dajia, I'd share them with him. When he was eating, the magician's eyes would occasionally look in different directions, as though he was afraid of missing out on anything that might be going on in the world.

Sometimes when he needed to go to the toilet he'd call me over to keep an eye on his stall. “As long as I don't find anything missing, that'll do fine. Don't try to sell anything – whatever you do, don't try to sell anything. Oh, and you mustn't touch the little black man.”

I was more than happy to oblige, and it was a simple job. Sitting in the magician's chair, it was like I was the magician. Sitting there, at last I had a chance to get close to the little black man. And then I clapped my hands like the magician, and sung a strange, muttering song, and chanted

an incomprehensible incantation. The little black man shakily rose to his feet, like he had heard something summoning him, and began to dance around the chalk circle.

He did no such thing, of course. The little black man continued sitting quietly on top of the magic matchbox.

The size of the matchbox was just right to be the little black man's chair, as though it was specially meant to serve that purpose. When the magician wasn't making him dance, the little black man would sometimes sit on the matchbox with just the same posture as a fully-grown person, one leg crossed over the other with one foot in the air. Sometimes his back would bend slightly with the wind, making him look like he was deep in contemplation. What kind of things did the little black man think about? Were there certain anxieties that only a little black man could have? Was there, somewhere out there, a school where only little black people could go to study? What lessons would they teach at such a school? Would the little black people also have to memorize their nine times table? Did the school for little black people have music class (and if not, how was it that the little black man could dance?) Being made from such flimsy paper, how could the little black man possibly play dodgeball? I secretly worried on the little black man's behalf, just the same way as my mum worried about me.

Regardless of whether I was minding the magician's stall or sitting with my insoles opposite him, I was always watching the little black man, completely lost in thoughts like these.

There was one time when the magician went to the toilet, for a number two, it seemed like, because he had been gone for a long time. I was sitting in the chair, bored out my mind, and the little black man was sitting on his matchbox, looking like he was bored out of his mind too. Because I was so tired that day, and because the weather was a bit chilly and there weren't many passers-by on the footbridge, I ended up dozing off. I guess I could only have been asleep for a very short time before I was woken up by rainwater. I looked up; rain was most definitely falling from an overcast sky. I wasn't bothered about my insoles – I had to get the magician's big umbrella open, and stick it into the umbrella stand next to the stall – but the umbrella was so big I couldn't pull it open no matter what I did – my hands were too short. Just like that, it was bucketing down, and soon a stream of water had taken shape on the footbridge, flowing towards the drainage holes. It just so happened that on that day the little black man had not been sitting on his matchbox, but had been on the ground, leaning against the side of the bridge. He was quickly soaked through. By the time I realised, the little black man was plastered to the ground, hopelessly splayed like a piece of discarded trash. Indifferent to the soaking I was getting, I urgently cast the umbrella aside and tried to pick him up. But because the paper had got stuck to the cement of the footbridge, when I tugged on the little black man's hand, it ripped right off. I started crying, tears plopping everywhere, wailing, "the little black man's hand's broken, the little black man's dead, his hand's broken!"

Auntie Ah Fen, who sold children's clothes at the next stall along (although I called her auntie, she was probably only just a kid in junior middle school), having first hurried to sort out the umbrella over her own stall, raced over to help me pull open mine, before helplessly watching the little black man on the ground, at a complete loss. I kept crying and crying, crying so hard I

nearly got a cramp. Only then did I see the magician return. With his two eyes facing in different directions, he began to gather up his goods.

“It’s raining, and you haven’t gone to sort out your own things,” he said. “If the insoles are all soaked you’ll catch hell from your mother.” I didn’t know whether or not he was angry; I stuttered, unable to get a sentence out intact. The little black man was dead, and his death had something to do with me. A hole had been poked through my heart, just like it was made out of paper.

When my mum ushered me out to go set up the stall the next day, I felt terrible. I didn’t want to go and be in the magician’s presence – but at the same time, I did, so I could find out for sure how the little black man was doing. Maybe it was just his hand that was broken, and he wasn’t dead. Couldn’t a little black man with a broken hand still dance? Still go to the little black people school?

When I arrived there that day, though the magician saw that I had come, he didn’t call out a greeting – “kiddo, have you eaten your fill today?” – like he used to. He just sat there in his chair, silent. I felt like I was a hopeless good-for-nothing. The cars beneath the footbridge were passing to and fro; the dust above the footbridge was drifting down onto my body; and there wasn’t a single passer-by who wasn’t happier than me.

At midday the magician bought a box of fried dumplings (not inviting me to eat any this time), and when he’d finished eating he wiped his mouth and opened his square valise. He took out the book and opened it, and there was a sheet of black paper and a pair of scissors tucked inside. The magician pulled them out, and set to work. In a jiffy, a little black man had been cut out. I slyly peered at the magician’s activity, and it made my heart beat as fast as a freshly wound clock.

The magician placed this new little black man on the ground, drew a fresh yellow chalk circle, and hummed his tune and called aloud at the same time. The new little black man was dancing, just the same as the little black man used to dance before – but with a little more dash, it seemed: he could twirl, now, too! Delighted, I yelled, “not dead – he’s not dead!” But once the words had come out of my mouth I felt they weren’t quite true. Could it be that this little black man was not the same one who had been plastered to the ground by yesterday’s rain – whose hand I had broken off? Could it be that he was just a new little black man, being used to replace the broken-handed little black man from before?

The magician looked at me through his right eye, a repressed smile playing around his mouth. With his left eye looking in another direction, he beckoned me over.

“Can you see any difference between this little black man and the one from yesterday?”

I shook my head. “He looks exactly the same,” I said, hesitantly. “Isn’t he? The little black man didn’t die, did he?”

With his eyes still facing in different directions, the magician said, “I don’t know either. Kiddo, you should know – there are some things in this world that no one can ever know. What we see before our eyes is not all that there is.”

“Why?” I asked.

The magician thought for a while, before replying in a hoarse voice. “Because sometimes the things you remember your whole life are not those things your eyes have seen.”

Honestly, I didn’t understand what the magician meant at all. But this was the first time he’d spoken to me like this – like he was talking to me as a grown-up, like there was something about me of which he approved.

When I got home and told my brother about the little black man, and about what the magician had said to me, he was angry. I didn’t understand why. He said he was going to tell mum, and she wouldn’t let me go sell insoles on the footbridge anymore, because the magician was going to trick me into running away with him.

That night I dreamt of the little black man. He took me to a forest (not that I even knew what a forest was back then – the furthest away I’d ever been was New Park) and we sang songs together, and played hide-and-seek. Deep within the forest I saw a bright patch, and the little black man said I couldn’t go there. I asked why, and he said it was too dark. But it was quite clearly brighter over there, I said, and he said there were some places that you might think are bright, but are actually dark.

I was not tricked into running away with the magician, and my brother didn’t tell my mum about what had happened with the little black man. One by one, the days continued to pass by. As I got to know the magician better and better, I pleaded with him in private time after time to tell me the secret of the little black man. It was only when I mentioned this to him that he turned serious.

“Kiddo, I’m telling you – all my magic is fake. Only the little black man is real. And because it’s real, there’s nothing I can tell you. Because it’s real, it’s not like the other magic – there’s no secret to tell.”

I didn’t believe it. I was sure the magician wasn’t telling me the truth – he was hiding something. I could tell by looking in his eyes – just like my mum said she could tell when I was lying by looking in my eyes.

“Don’t trick me,” I said. “Don’t think you can trick me just because I’m a kid.”

As the beginning of the new school year grew closer each day, my mum announced that once school started I wouldn’t be selling from the stall any more. This was depressing news. Again and again, I fought with her for some chance to carry on during the term, even if it was only on holidays. But whatever I said, she wouldn’t budge – I suspected my big brother had told her my secret.

I talked this over with the magician. “If you don’t teach me it’ll be too late – I’m starting school soon,” I said woefully. “If you don’t teach me you’ll regret it – if you die all of a sudden there’ll be no one who knows the magic of the little black man.” I don’t know when I turned into such a smooth-talker – maybe that business savvy my mum mentioned could run in the blood after all.

The magician just laughed, one eye looking at some far-off place, the other seeming to look straight into my soul.

One evening when I was packing up the stall at eight, the magician, having put away the little black man and his magic tricks, beckoned me towards him. I followed him without the slightest hesitation, my heart pounding. He kept going straight ahead, right across the footbridge and along to the furthest corner of the market, where there was a door. This door, I knew, led out onto the roof – a place where the grown-ups said we weren’t allowed to go. With one twist of his hand, the magician opened the lock, and gestured for me to head on up.

It was the first time I had been on the roof of the market, and I was entranced by the view.

The buildings of Taipei were of a completely different height back then. From the footbridge we could see the holiday fireworks over Tamsui river, and when the weather was good we could even see the hills of Yangmingshan. The Taipei of those times still resembled a basin: even if you stood in the bottom of the basin, in some place without much elevation, you could still see to the basin’s edge, and everything within it. In that moment I stood there on the roof with the magician, the glimmering lanterns of Ximending on one side, the Presidential Office Building lit up on the other. The magician pointed off to the side, to a corner beneath a neon sign.

“This is where I live,” he said. “But the day will come when I will leave this place.” The corner in which the magician lived was covered by a rain shield for the neon sign’s generator. Along with a jumble of plastic bags and a disheveled sleeping bag, it looked like there were also a surprising number of books heaped around the place.

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. Anywhere is fine.”

“I want to be a magician too.”

“Being a magician wouldn’t suit you. Because magicians have many secrets, and people with many secrets do not have happy lives.”

“Why?”

“Forget about it. It’s not something you can understand. And magicians can’t stay in the same place for too long. Kiddo, you’ve always wanted to learn the magic of the little black man, right?”

“Right!” I nodded my head as hard as I could. Could it really be that the magician was prepared to teach me? My heart thudded so hard it felt like it was trying to escape.

“It can’t be learned. Because the little black man is real – and since it’s real, it can’t be learned.”

This old line again. “Then give him to me, okay? If it’s magic, you can teach me, and if it’s real, you can just give the little black man to me – how about that?”

“When I was young I thought that if you caught a butterfly and mounted it as a specimen, you possessed a butterfly. It was only much later that I realised a butterfly specimen is not a butterfly. Only when I understood this clearly was I able to do real magic, like the little black man – because I could take something out of my imagination, out of my head, and turn it into something everyone can see. All I did was influence the world you can all see – just the same as when someone makes a movie.”

I angled my head to one side. Next to us, the enormous neon sign for Hey Song Sarsaparilla was producing a humming noise. I didn’t understand what the magician was saying; his eyes gleamed blue in the blue neon light, green in the green neon light. I thought about what he had said; what he called ‘real’ magic left me feeling deeply confused.

“So is there any way I could do it? Do something like making the little black man dance?”

“Kiddo, there’s no way I can tell you if there’s any way. But we’re two of a kind, you and me. I’m going to give you something, and you can use it however you see fit.”

Having finished speaking, the magician extended his right hand, as if about to reveal something. He held his palm before my eyes for maybe as long as half a minute. I couldn’t help but look at all the calluses, all the complicated, criss-crossing ridges of his palm. The magician slowly bent his index finger, middle finger, and thumb, and inserted them into his left eye. My own eyeballs ached at the sight. The magician’s eye socket seemed to be very soft – his fingers quickly extended inside – and with a light twist, the magician plucked out his left eye, and placed it on the palm of his right hand. The eyeball he’d dug out didn’t bleed, didn’t tear – it was like a perfect, newborn, opalescent star.