

“Disillusioned”

by Andrew D. Doan

Where are you?

Jared presses the lock button on the side of his phone and jams it into the inner pocket of his coat. Five steps farther along the sidewalk he yanks it out again and taps a terse reply.

Downtown

A response arrives moments later.

Why? What are you doing?

Just walking around to get some fresh air. Thought I might try some of my magic out here.

Her reply is unusually long in arriving.

You're kidding, right?

Why would I be kidding? I like walking, and I like magic.

Don't you think there's something more important we should be doing?

He resists the urge to type something risqué, deciding that she wouldn't find it funny just then.

Not really, but obviously you do.

Another noticeably long delay before she answers.

I don't think your sarcasm is helping the situation.

I wasn't being sarcastic. You asked me where I am and what I'm doing. I told you the truth. Ur being overly sensitive.

He resorts to abbreviations whenever a message gets long.

I'm just worried about you...and about us?

He wonders about the question mark. Is she asking him if she should be worried or telling him that she already is? He has resumed walking as he waits for each response. It's a breezy, cool day in the city, and he starts to feel anxious if he stands in one place for long. He's headed in the general direction of Copley Square.

Don't worry about me too much. It was just a job. People quit them all the time. We knew today would be rough, right? We'll figure something out. No need to get frantic.

I'm not frantic. Now you're the one being sensitive!

Texting is one of his least favorite forms of communication, but he finds it especially frustrating when a disagreement is in play. It's far too easy to misread someone's tone or intention. On a day like this day, he knows it's pointless to try to defend or clarify himself electronically. Emojis and abbreviations won't get the job done. Better to cut and run.

I just need a little time to unwind and clear my mind.

He's across from the square. Though an orange colored hand illuminated on the light pole prohibits pedestrians from proceeding, several people move into the crosswalk anyway. He stares at the hand and feels frustration at each passing second. No message arrives on his phone. No change appears on the traffic signal. Nothing to do but stand and wait for the universe to oblige.

His phone sounds an alert just as the signal changes. WALK. He glances at his screen as he moves across the road.

But you'll be able to find something else, right?

Half a dozen sarcastic responses come to mind in a flurry, but he restrains himself.

Probably. Who knows? Quitting on a charitable non-profit after only 7 months isn't exactly great for my resume.

How did Larry take it when you told him? Was it harder than you were expecting?

Let's just say he wasn't ordering me a cake and balloons.

He's hurting her feelings—he's fully aware of that. By coming down here. By not telling her he was coming down here. By his messages. By choosing not to be with her just then. She wants to talk. He wants to walk. She wants to process the situation. He wants to forget about it until he has no other choice but to own up to it.

And magic. He wants to do some magic tricks.

He's reached the square, though he'd been hoping it would be much busier than this. Today the crowd is sparse. It's a Tuesday afternoon in mid-October, the summer rush is over, and the city has settled into the doldrums of autumn.

He's aware of the fact that performing in the city without a permit is unlawful, but he's never heard of anyone actually getting fined or arrested for it. Despite the risk, he decides to be a busker for an hour or two.

But he's neglected to bring one of the indispensable tools of any street performer. A quick rummage through one of the nearby

trashcans yields a suitable substitute. He overturns a cardboard cup—venti size—and drains the few ounces of latte still clinging to the bottom. He pulls a couple of ones and a five from his wallet and stuffs them into the cup.

He's ready.

An area of open sidewalk near the stone steps leading up to the library provides access to passersby and a quick path of retreat should the need arise. He places the cup on the ground near his feet and pulls out a deck of red-backed Bicycles.

He shuffles and cuts the cards with flashy precision in hopes of attracting someone's attention. As he cycles through the motions with well-practiced fingers and hands, his mind wanders to the weighty events of the day...

Though his resignation hadn't been entirely unexpected, when Jared said the words that morning his supervisor looked genuinely shocked—and wounded. So much had changed since Jared first took his position with the organization earlier in the year.

At the time, he seemed so well matched with their values and mission that he couldn't wait to get started. The job description looked ideal—almost unbelievably so. In all the months he'd spent sifting through job postings, he'd found no other position that so perfectly combined his business education with his desire to create justice and opportunity around the world. Both he and his new employer had been wildly optimistic about the prospects back then.

Back then...

"What are you doing with those cards?" A young man on a bike has pulled up.

"Well, I thought I'd do a couple tricks. You interested in seeing 'em?"

"Why not?" The man props his two-wheeler against the handrail and stands with arms crossed.

Jared jumps into the moment and works his magic.

"Keep your eye on the Queen of Hearts, okay? The Queen of Hearts. Don't let her out of your sight!"

The Queen disappears like she always does only to swoop in at the last moment and save him from looking like a fool.

The young man looks at the cards suspiciously before announcing, "Yeah. That was pretty good. How'd you do that?"

Jared shrugs and gently pushes the coffee cup forward a couple of inches. “Want to see another?”

The man on the bike leaves a few minutes later. During the next half hour, Jared entertains a group of elderly tourists, a few college students, and a woman in a business suit who appears much too busy to watch until he shows her one of his favorites—the “single-handed heart swap.”

She gives him a ten.

After an hour of card tricks and \$40 in profit, Jared puts the deck away and pulls out a red rubber ball about an inch around. He begins bouncing it off the sidewalk back and forth to each hand. He does this smoothly without watching his hands or the ball. Instead, he looks up and down the sidewalk trying to make eye contact with anyone nearby.

An older man in a straw fedora and beige windbreaker looks in Jared’s direction. Jared smiles at him and holds the red ball up at eye level. The man appears confused as Jared gives the ball a little shake with his left hand before ricocheting it off the cement to his right hand. The man’s eyes widen in surprise as Jared returns the ball to eye level and gives it another little shake.

The ball is white.

Jared bounces the white ball and returns it to his left hand in an instant. The older man is now staring in bewilderment as Jared smiles and shakes the ball.

The ball is red once again.

The man cuts through the pedestrians moving along the sidewalk and covers the distance between him and Jared as quickly as his stiff bones allow.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Jared is still smiling. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“Am I seeing things or did that ball just change color?”

Jared holds up the red ball and examines it briefly before responding, “This ball?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

Jared shakes the ball just before he bounces it to his right hand. He’s caught the ball once again and holds it out in plain sight.

It’s now solidly white without a single trace of red on it.

The man’s look of confusion transforms into a broad grin. “That’s pretty nifty! You some sort of magician?”

“Some sort, yes. You could say that.”

The man stares at Jared’s hand. “You probably won’t let me take a closer look at the ball, will you?”

“Sure. Go ahead!” Jared hands it to the man who rolls it around in his fingers. After inspecting it, squeezing it, even sniffing it, the man returns it to Jared with an incredulous shake of his head.

“I know there’s gotta be something special about the ball, but I’ll be darned if I can figure out! That’s a nice trick, young man. Bravo!” He claps his hands a few times until Jared interrupts.

“Oh, wait! You haven’t seen the best part yet!” The craft of showmanship is exhilarating. Jared bounces the ball from right hand to left.

It’s back to its original red color.

He shoots it off the sidewalk and back to his right hand.

It’s white.

With increasing speed, he cycles back and forth several more times. To the left. To the right. Back. Forth. Red. White.

He slams the ball downward one last time from his right hand and instantly holds it out toward the man. He peels the fingers of his left hand back for the slow, dramatic revelation.

His left hand is empty. The man snaps his eyes over to Jared’s right hand and gives a little gasp when he sees that it too is empty.

The ball is gone.

The man gives him twenty dollars before walking away stumped and smiling.

Jared moves closer to the street corner because it is more heavily trafficked but still within reach of the safety of the library stairs. He keeps the cards in his pocket and runs through the ball routine for the next half hour.

The reactions of those who watch it are as varied as the watchers themselves. Confusion. Disbelief. Accusations of sorcery. Amazement.

He treasures the look of amazement and wonder even more than the coins and bills they drop into the coffee cup.

The ball zips off the sidewalk from right hand to left and disappears once again.

“Wow! That’s incredible!”

No older than 22 or 23, she's short and smooth skinned. Her eyes are blazing with interest.

"How did you do that?"

It's the most common response any magician—street side or center stage—hears after completing a trick. Most people say it as a reflex. It's merely a vocalization of their astonishment.

"Oh, I can't tell you that. A magician never reveals his secrets!"

It's one of the most common responses any magician offers to the question. It's the fundamental law of magic. Rule number one. It's non-negotiable.

But today, Jared's mind and emotions are ruffled. He's distracted—not only by his recent lack of employment but also by the fetching gaze of the young woman in front of him.

"Oh, come on! I really want to know." She taps his wrist playfully. "Please? I promise I'll never tell anyone!"

There's an odd thrill for him in that moment. He's savoring the feeling. She recognizes his talent. He's important. Noticed.

He looks around as if someone from the magicians' association might be eavesdropping nearby ready to pounce on any slip of the tongue.

"I really can't."

Both of her hands brush against his fingers.

"You're sure?"

He feels torn in two directions but finds the fortitude to resist her charm.

"I'm sure."

She pulls her hands away with a shrug and frown. "Fine, but can you at least show me the trick again or is that forbidden too?"

According to many magicians and illusionists it is. Don't repeat a trick—at least not for the same person and definitely not in close proximity situations like street magic. Some of the more confident performers don't follow this principle, but Jared always has.

Until today.

"I...guess I could do that."

Her smile returns as she claps her hands in excitement.
"Great!"

Jared pulls the red ball out of his pocket, and the young woman leans forward in anticipation. She's going to watch more closely this time.

As he's done hundreds of times since he created the illusion several years earlier, Jared begins by bouncing the red ball back and forth between each hand. As it always has, the red ball transforms to white in an instant.

She steps back a bit in order to watch him and the ball at the same time. Up to this point she's been nodding her head back and forth as she keeps the path of the ball in her sight. Now, she's trying to get a wider angle of view.

Jared is accustomed to audience members heckling him or attempting to discover his methods. It's part of the game. He's never found it particularly bothersome.

Until today.

He's nervous and frazzled. It's been a long, difficult day, and tomorrow won't be much better.

He slips up just a little but recovers and tries to hasten on. If you make a mistake, draw as little attention to it as possible—it's another basic rule of performing magic. What may seem dreadfully obvious to you might go entirely unnoticed by someone on the other side of the trick. The key is to act calm and avoid any misplaced reaction—get to the end as quickly and smoothly as possible.

But she's zeroed in on him. Her senses are heightened. She's been looking for the secret.

"Wait, what?"

He forces a smile and holds out both empty hands. The ball has disappeared once again.

"That's it?"

"Yup!"

Her eyes are accusing him.

"You're kidding!"

"What do you mean?"

She crosses her arms in front of her. "I saw! I saw how you do it! You have a—"

"Listen, I'm sorry. I messed up a little bit."

"Yeah. I noticed." The flirtatious smile has vaporized and been replaced by an indignant smirk.

Jared tries to find a way to spin the situation. “Well, you wanted to see how the trick works, so I guess you got your wish, right?” He was trying to sound playful but came across sounding apologetic and defeated instead.

“I guess so. I thought it would be way more complicated than that.”

“That’s what a lot of people think about magic. Actually, most tricks have very simple, straightforward explanations.”

“But, that—that’s just—stupid!”

“Excuse me?”

She looks irritated and angry. “That’s stupid! You’re out here trying to impress people with these amazing magic tricks and underneath they’re just...stupid little...fakes!”

“I’m not trying to impress people. I just want to entertain—“

“Yes, but part of the entertainment is the amazement! That’s why I stopped and watched you in the first place. Now that I know how it works, it’s just...cheesy.”

“Well, I’m sorry to be so disappointing, but that’s how magic works.”

She flips her hair across one shoulder with a snobbish sweep of her hand.

“I’ve got to get going. Thanks for...whatever.”

As she marches away her boot catches the side of the coffee cup, spilling several coins onto the sidewalk when it falls over.

Jared watches her leave and seethes as he stands alone.

“What an arrogant—I can’t believe she was so rude! She has no idea how much I’ve worked to improve my skills. It’s really hard to make it look easy!”

“If you keep talking to yourself like that, people will start to wonder about you!”

Jared has been muttering under his breath, and his antics have caught the attention of a ragged looking man in an oily trench coat. The man laughs at him as he shuffles along.

Jared retrieves the coins and cup before stomping over to the stairs. He sits and sulks.

“One minute I’m the king of magic, and the next I’m just a stupid huckster. She’s very naïve. Did she think I actually made the

ball disappear? Is she really that stupid? They're called illusions for a reason, lady."

He stares across the street and allows the swarm of city sights and sounds to envelope him. He knows his time on the street corner is short. He can't stay out much longer. He will have to go home soon. She needs reassurance...and a plan.

"Excuse me? Mister?"

Two boys are standing on the top step a few levels above and behind Jared. The younger looking of the two is the one who spoke. He's got sandy blond hair and a jacket that sits lopsided on his small frame.

"Yes?"

"My mom said we could come over and ask you to show us your trick."

The taller, older boy cuts in, "He's the one who wants to see it. Mom made me come along for protection just in case you're some sort of creep."

The younger boy ignores his brother's rudeness. "We were standing over there by the library, and I saw you doing a magic trick for that lady."

The woman's response still stings like a stiff slap on the cheek. Jared doesn't feel inclined to disappoint anyone else that day.

"Oh. That. Actually, I was just about to quit for the day. I've been out here for a while, and I'm getting kind of cold."

"We really want to see your trick. Please?"

"Can't you see that he doesn't want to do it? You're so annoying!" The older brother has pulled out a phone. He's tapping and swiping as he chides his sibling.

With wounded eyes, the younger brother makes one last attempt. "Please? It looked really cool when I saw you doing it for the lady, but I couldn't see everything. I want to see it closer."

Jared complies—partly out of a desire to entertain the younger brother and partly out of a desire to regain some confidence. He joins the boys on the top step and runs through the routine. The younger boy's eyes follow each of Jared's movements intently, and they grow wide with wonder every time the ball changes from red to white and back again.

When it disappears at the end, the boy stares at Jared in awe before announcing with a grin, "Wow! That was so cool! How'd you do that?"

"Sorry. I can't tell you. A magician never reveals his secrets!"

Still holding his phone, the older brother only occasionally glanced in Jared's direction as the illusion progressed. "Oh, that's easy! I know how you did it! That's so easy!"

Jared cringes as he recalls the way his conversation with the woman fell apart earlier. He didn't make any mistakes this time, but that doesn't mean the secret is safe. Anyone who looks closely enough can see the method behind his magic if their timing is just right.

"Well, I didn't see how it works! I really want to know. Please?"

After pocketing his phone, the older one pokes his brother with his bony elbow. "Oh, come on! It's such a lame trick. I can't believe you don't get it. He's never gonna tell you anyway. Good magicians don't do that, right?" He looks to Jared for confirmation.

As he nods in agreement, Jared wonders if the older one really knows the truth. Though any illusion is subject to discovery, the ball trick is sneaky and subtle. He begins to suspect that the gangly teenager is bluffing his younger brother.

"Well, even if you don't tell me, I still think it's cool."

Another intrusive poke with his elbow. "Cool? It's lame! You know it's not real magic, right? The ball doesn't *actually* disappear. He's got it in his pocket or up his sleeve or something."

Jared is standing silently as the boys bicker. His suspicions are confirmed. The older boy has no idea how it works.

"I know that, but just because it's not real magic doesn't mean it's not good!"

"Whatever! We gotta go. Mom's waiting." The older one leaves without acknowledging Jared or waiting for his brother who is left standing alone on the step with disappointment overtaking his face.

Jared leans forward and speaks quietly, "How old are you?"

"Ten."

"If you really want me to, I'll show you how it works."

"Really? I thought magicians couldn't do that."

“We can make exceptions for people who can handle it. People who love magic so much that they will protect the secret—honorary magicians.”

The boy’s expression brightens at the thought of being chosen for such a great honor. Jared can see him deliberating about the offer before he answers, “No thanks. It’s a good trick, but I don’t want you to show me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I like not knowing. It seems better that way. Thanks for doing the trick!” He starts to run but stops short and walks back toward Jared.

“I almost forgot. My mom gave this to me to give to you. She said it would be rude to watch your magic and not give you something.”

He holds out a five-dollar bill.

Jared had forgotten about the collection cup at his feet. He takes the money and stoops down to retrieve his stash.

“Thank you. That’s very kind.”

“See ya!”

The boy scoots across the pavement while Jared places the contents of the coffee cup into his coat pocket. He’ll count it later. He walks down the stairs toward the street corner as he types on his phone.

I’ll be home soon. Love you.

He sends the message and joins the stream of pedestrians crossing the crowded roadway.