The Magic Method

The Secret Preparation

Back in the golden age of Nintendo video games—with the Cold War thawing and the Internet spawning—I travelled from my small college town to spend a summer back in hot Houston, Texas. Between seven and eight on my last morning there, we sat in a triangle as if telling stories around a campfire or taking turns around a board game. As Robert lit the little paper zeppelin, his baby-blue eyes rolling in mock delirium beneath his blonde, punk-rocker hair, Kregg and I each stifled a tinge of anxiety over the reek—Kregg because his father would be back to the office in the morning and I because the virtual stranger who was my ride to Indiana might show up at any minute. Robert in his XXXL Clash “Sandinista” T-shirt seemed as careless and carefree as always. Sitting here with my 70s disco era friend and my 80s new-wave era friend gave me an eerie feeling, like a special effect in a science fiction movie.

I knew Robert, a friend of mine from Athens, Georgia, from hanging out at the college radio station. Seeing him here in the familiar T-shirt, passing me the little zeppelin, gave me a sensory flashback of sitting back home in the soft chairs of the WUOG sound booth with Robert cranking up the Clash song “Sound of the Sinners.” Robert had found out through some kind of divine fluke that one of the employees he managed at a Galveston KFC wanted someone to help out with gas and driving for a non-stop trip from Houston to Muncie, Indiana where—as it happened--Dr. Uranus wanted me to meet him at the end of my summer-long reunion with my best friend from high school, Kregg. Dr. Uranus was going up to buy a used car and wanted me to help him get it back to Athens from Muncie.

Kregg and I had set up camp in this back room here at the combination office and shop of Semper Fi Lawn Care, his father’s business. The building where we had lived all summer was actually a converted residential house with a military-grade fence and security system, this being somewhat of a bad part of the city and most of the workers being untraceable, illegal aliens. By day, we had mown grass beneath towering office buildings and, by night, partied with old high-school friends at pizza pubs and dance clubs. Once that summer, I had even been arrested for public intoxication and had to be picked up outside the jail by Kregg and his father the next morning. I had felt as rattled as a broken weed-eater riding back to the shop in the back of the classic pick-up truck, the hangover not yet starting to loosen its painful grip.

I handed the little paper zeppelin back to Robert. The Alan Parsons Project album *I Robot* was playing. Almost as a flourish, he expertly drew in the secondary smoke through his nostrils before taking a hit proper. He relished the moment, the winning smile on his baby face that combined with his reputation as a genius and his love of comic books to earn him the nickname of “Boy Wonder.” Through some other strange connection, Robert along with several other Athens friends had been hired as KFC managers in Galveston over the past few years. The seemingly high pay and hurricane parties in Houston must have been an adventure, but they all, one-by-one, eventually returned to Athens. I asked Robert if the guys were covering the store for him but found out the Athens boys each managed their own store.

Robert passed the burning zeppelin back to me. When the albumhad ended, Kregg put on the *Blade Runner* soundtrack. He set the needle down with the familiar few seconds of groove static before the electronic melody invoked the movie’s rain, decay, and dystopian androids. My suitcase and college book pack were leaning against the wall, ready to go. I drank from my Coors beer can, as worried that I wouldn’t have time for another beer as I was that Bruce would be offended by the reek.

I offered the little zeppelin to Kregg, which he refused as always because it might affect a military career. Somehow his bohemian taste in music and friends belied his military character. He was an expert in military history, master of complex war games like USN, and a candidate for an ROTC scholarship at Sam Houston State University. These two sides of his personality—modern realism and medieval romance—seemed superimposed when Kregg in his military-cut red hair served as Dungeon Master for his long-haired high-school friends. We would gather with combat charts and monster illustrations, polyhedral dice and spell charts, when Kregg seemed equally adept at the science of strategy and the art of fantastical role play. We had worked our way through his Temple of the Beast, using diplomacy to deal with evil priests and using weapons to defeat the Godzilla-sized creature they worshiped. We had seen the borders of Kregg’s world expand as his Demon Dungeon led to bargains with travelling wizards and battles on land and sea, the terrain of mountain, desert, and forest laid out in colorful hexagons on his home-made maps.

Kregg and I had been best friends through our years at Spring Woods Senior High, ever since I came from Athens after ninth grade. We had found and lost girlfriends, had worked our first jobs—Kregg at The Wild Pair—a shoe store at the neighborhood mall, I at the neighborhood McDonald’s, and together at Semper Fi Lawn Care in the summers. Finally, we had got our driver’s licenses, gone on road trips, applied to colleges, and graduated. Once, when I had purged my bedroom, Kregg had helped me throw away a box of magic tricks—my vanishing milk pitcher, my fruit production can—and a box of books—Hardy Boys, Bible studies--brought on the plane with me from Athens. We had heaved the boxes into the dumpster behind our apartment complex. A black light, lava lamp, candles, 8-track tapes of Pink Floyd, Yes, and Fleetwood Mac, books by J.R.R. Tolkien, Frank Herbert, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. as well as an Underwood 5 typewriter had all quickly occupied the empty spaces.

I passed the almost gone zeppelin to Robert, who savored it and saved the precious last bit in a pouch. We talked about bands and movies, the conversation turning to comic books, which Robert collected and studied almost academically. Robert seemed to have a scholarly inside scoop on popular culture. He explained that one trick to coming up with a new story line or super hero was to mix genres, like the *Batman* series mixing master-mind detective work with the powers of technology.

 “Like *Star Wars* mixing science fiction with fairy tales, light sabers for swords and the Force for magic spells.” I said.

“We should write a sci-fi, romantic, western,” said Greg.

“…horror movie,” I added.

“…war story,” he tacked on.

“…animated…”

“…mystery…”

“…musical…”

“…with no dialogue…”

“…and breakthrough sound effects…”

“…in Sense-a-Round.”

I had never seen Robert react quite the way he did next. His laughter turned into a giggle, which turned into a kind of out-of-control, rapid-fire snorting. Maybe the years of rolling little paper zeppelins had caught up with him.

“You guys should be a comedy team,” Robert said, giving a kind of priestly blessing, which actually felt good.

I don’t remember if I ever got the other Coors can, but Bruce finally knocked on the front door of the office. We went into the front room with its industrial metal desks and brutal, black AT&T business phones, Kregg answering the door and I dragging out my luggage. Robert introduced us to Bruce, who was bright and chipper, bouncy, destroying my mellow feeling. His white socks, plaid shorts, and yellow golf shirt hurt my eyes. He chattered happily. The trip might take 16 hours, and we would probably arrive after midnight.

“Before you go, try that new trick,” Kregg said, surprising me a little because he never bothered with long farewells. Although Kregg and I had thrown away my collection of tricks during high school, I had renewed my interest in magic in college, studying with Dr. Uranus. I had been experimenting with a new mental effect during the summer, reinventing and combining some old magic secrets. I had confided in Kregg in order to develop the skeleton, the basic method, but had not yet fleshed out the full special effect, much less found a presentation with any feeling or meaning. In those days, the secret method is what excited me about magic—the cold science, the hidden cause, the raw power.

“I’m still working on this one, but I’ll give it a try.” I was wary of Bruce, so I tried the trick on Robert. On a piece of paper, I wrote the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. “When I turn around touch one of the numbers and tell me when you’re done.”

“Done,” said Robert a moment later.

With immediate clarity, I knew which number he had touched. I turned back and pretended to think carefully, feigned concentration: “Two, no, three. You touched the three!”

“Wheel, that’s not bad,” said Robert slowly. Bruce was nodding, almost jumping. I tried not to show my pleasure that the magic method was working.

“Try a number from 1 to 20.” I said. “Write it down on the back of the paper so you can’t change your mind. Put it in your pocket and tell me when you’re done.”

“Done,” said Robert.

Again, I had a number in mind before I turned around but acted out a laborious process. Finally I said, “You made an unusual choice: 20,” only to be met with awkward silence. I wasn’t sure how I had missed as the method should have worked.

“How could you even hope to know?” Bruce still seemed puzzled, almost as if I had been right.

Robert shrugged.

“But that would have been good, wouldn’t it?” Kregg said laughing, stealing a magic stock line. He was still on the porch laughing as Bruce and I pulled out of the gate of Semper Fi Lawn Care.

The Effect

We were headed north toward Texarkana in Bruce’s family-size 1972 Chevy Impala with blue paint still as bright as an Easter egg. I officially designated the start of the trip a buzz-kill as SUNNY 99.1 played John Cougar’s little ditty about “Jack and Diane” and as Bruce chattered on about Cougar being from Indiana, going to New York to make record deals, getting popular, changing his name back to Mellencamp, and whatever else. I resigned myself to the long trip ahead with no beer.

Before we left Texas, I had told Bruce the story of how I first met Dr. Uranus. He walked by my desk on the first morning of English 102 at UGA, and upon seeing Corinda’s *13 Steps to Mentalism* buried in my stack of books, he fished a business card out of his shirt pocket and laid it on the desk in front of me. He was obviously the professor in his blue blazer and tie, but strangely, the business card was for a professor in the psychology department. The card pictured impossible objects—a Penrose triangle and a Necker cube--outlined in red ink on each side of the odd name of Thomas Orton Uranus. I found out later that my instructor and Dr. Uranus were re-enacting an urban legend, a prank I also played on my students with this same instructor about five years later in this same old building, Park Hall, another story, which to explain might stretch the narrative fabric too thin.

It turns out that my actual instructor Greg Thornton was lounging in a desk in casual clothes, giving grunts of agreement as students drifted in complaining about English class, particularly sympathetic to a delirious, shaggy guy who said he was having to retake the damn class. He was a graduate student, at the time only a few years older than the students and easily passed as an undergraduate student. When Dr. Uranus walked in, Greg Thornton continued mirroring the attitudes and motions of the students, sitting up at his desk, opening a notebook. Dr. Uranus called names off of a roster, finally asking if there was anyone whose name he had not called. Greg Thornton raised his hand, rolling his eyes rudely, channeling the frustration of the shaggy guy.

“Your name, please?”

“Stud Man.” He said with a distinct pause between syllables. Dr. Uranus wrote it down dutifully with a wrinkled brow, and went on to introduce the class, displaying the fifth edition of the course textbook. Greg Thornton raised his hand rudely again.

“Yes, Studman?”

“I have the fourth edition from the last time I had to take this class.” It was a challenge, an ultimatum. A few giggles twittered around the room. Dr. Uranus, this time with eyebrows raised, with visible restraint explained that in the fourth edition some selections would be missing and that page numbers would be different. Studman would have to take responsibility for any confusion or missed assignments. Dr. Uranus went on to explain the class would cover composition with a view to fiction, drama, and poetry. He waxed a little poetical, saying literature makes noble the human heart, uplifts the soul, edifies the spirit. Greg Thornton’s hand shot up again.

“Yes, Studman?”

“What about nonsense poems? What about parody, dark humor, grim realism? Surely not all literature is covered by such a Victorian mindset!” The class was almost perfectly quiet, stilled by a fight-or-flight impulse perhaps, only a single nervous laugh coming from the shaggy guy. Dr. Uranus milked the moment with that great secret of comedy—the pause, staring silently at Studman.

“If you think you can teach this class better than me, then get up here and do it!” Dr. Uranus threw down the roster and notes and he stormed out of the classroom, slamming the door. Without missing a beat, Greg Thornton came to the front and wrote his name on the board. With a relaxed stage presence, he passed out the syllabus and started class.

Most of the students understood the prank quickly, but as everyone was swarming out, one sorority girl stayed behind, still wanting to know if Greg Thornton was really the instructor. This was the punch line of the short version of this story I told as a three-part joke dozens of times in the following years. I wrapped up by telling Bruce how I did get in touch with Dr. Uranus, who eventually became a magic mentor for me. Bruce laughed at the story but seemed concerned about something.

“You have to be careful of things like rock music, horror movies, and magic where we live, you know, in the Bible belt,” Bruce said brightly. I had never thought of anywhere as far north as Indiana as being part of the Bible belt but didn’t want to deny any common ground. He continued, “Some folks even think playing cards are of the devil. Especially be careful of anything like that trick you did with the numbers. It’s too much like the occult, you know, psychic powers, fortune telling.’’

“Sure.” I agreed. “You had better call magic ‘illusions’ and ‘tricks.’” Bruce didn’t seem to know of Uri Gellar or the Amazing Kreskin, so the topic of conversation withered.

I took a shift driving and after several hours of driving the long, straight highway through Arizona with Bruce asleep in the passenger seat, I suddenly jerked, seeing the same view of endless plains and prairies, not knowing how long I had slept at the wheel. We skirted Memphis, clipped Missouri, and pushed on through Illinois. Bruce took over excitedly at the Indiana state line, and we arrived at his family’s house in Muncie after midnight as predicted.

As I waited in Bruce’s bedroom for Dr. Uranus to come pick me up, I saw the movie poster for *Magic* that displayed the disturbing head of the ventriloquist doll below the eerie words from the trailer:

Abracadabra,

I sit on his knee.

Presto Chango,

And now he is me.

Hocus Pocus,

We take her to bed.

Magic is fun;

We’re dead.

Bruce in no way seemed to be a magic hobbyist, so—at that late hour, after that long trip, the poster felt like a strange coincidence, an anomaly with significance, or as the Police sang it, “synchronicity.” I remembered one key scene when Anthony Hopkins as Corky performs “Do as I Do,” a simple card trick that any magician would recognize, but because he is obsessed with Peggy who really wants to believe, the effect is of genuine telepathic communication between soulmates as he seems to struggle, fail, and at last succeed, slumping exhausted in his chair, saying, “I didn’t fail. I didn’t fail. I didn’t fail.” As revealed later by the doll Fats, possessed by his psychopathic, split personality, Corky chillingly lets her believe, even leads her to believe their minds have touched. “Corky does magic. I only do tricks,” says Fats before telling Peggy how Corky has duped her. “You never know how many people want to believe in magic.”

Dr. Uranus had made the 10-hour trip from Athens to Muncie earlier that week and would be awaiting my late night call. He had already briefed me on plans for picking up the car and had already given me some background about his family, all of which he refreshed for me on the short ride in his red 1980 Datsun 210 to his mother’s farm on the outskirts of Muncie.

In addition to his mother, I would meet his brother Clive and his uncle Otto the next day. Clive worked at a local Westinghouse factory and lived alone in the city. His wife Martha had left him for a plumber but, over the years, the couple had hit Clive up for money and even lived with him for a while during some hard times. Clive was quiet and shy and tolerated their impositions. Dr. Uranus had also confided in me that Clive was neurotic as well as having borderline or undiagnosed paranoia. I would notice immediately Clive’s odd mannerisms, always speaking softly as though in a library or telling secrets, never making direct eye contact but looking down as though reading from notes. Clive sometimes called Dr. Uranus long distance to tell him suspiciously that things had been moved around or were missing from his home. Clive extrapolated all kinds of information from these small details—a displaced book revealing that Martha and her husband were breaking in, a missing receipt indicating corporate spies were at work. Sometimes Clive reported this suspicious activity to the police, although Dr. Uranus would try to calm him down, knowing that if he waited the delusions might dissipate. Dr. Uranus said this aberration was probably close to what crime-scene psychics, the true believers, suffered, which together with the observer effect plus expectancy effect plus Barnum effect plus random chance has led to some reported successes and many urban legends.

I had also been prepared by the tales of Dr. Uranus for meeting Uncle Otto who rarely spoke and also had strange habits—for example, always leaving his place setting on the kitchen table. He had been living with his sister (Mother Uranus as I call her) for many years, paying a little rent and doing some chores such as burning the garbage. Uncle Otto suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder ever since an honorable discharge during World War II. From time to time, Uncle Otto would be found sitting in the dark kitchen in the throes of flashback, gripping his chair and repeating, “The blood, the blood…”—some of the few words Dr. Uranus had ever heard him speak.

The next day I awoke on the Davenport as Mother Uranus called the couch, the light of day not entirely dispelling my gothic mood of the previous night, here on this isolated farm on this long country road. In the yard on the edge of a corn field stood an old barn full of rusting equipment and old hay bales. About 100 yards of corn grew in rows between the yard and the thick woods beyond. Apparently, a local farmer paid to use the land each year.

Mother Uranus poured a cup of coffee for me and put out pastries. She had jet black hair, probably dyed at her age, and wore a blue dress with red print flowers. I was to call her Ruby. She sat at the kitchen table across from the intact place setting of Uncle Otto, in front of a big, open family Bible, which was brimming with newspaper clippings, wedding announcements, church programs, pictures, and notes. She planned to make rhubarb pie later and hoped we would be staying to have some.

Dr. Uranus came in from outside and ushered me into the garage to see the 1960 Ford Falcon that we would be driving back to Athens. It was white with some rusty patches, including a hole in the floor by the gas pedal that was big enough to reach through to pick up dropped change. The blue interior was a fairly good shape. Uncle Otto had been proud of this car in his younger days but had not driven it in years and was ready to sell if he could keep it in the family.

I commented on a stuffed chicken on some metal shelves next to the car, and seeing Dr. Uranus puff his pipe thoughtfully, I knew he was about to begin one of his tales. It seems when the four siblings—Thomas Orton, Mary-Margaret, Rebecca, and Clive—were young, they adopted one of the farmyard chickens as a pet. Although they gathered eggs from the other nameless birds and without qualms stepped on the heads of others, plucked out the feathers, and ate them for dinner, this one chicken had been chosen as a favorite and named Frieda. The children played with her and petted her. Then one day Frieda, ranging free, had wandered into the road and was struck by a passing car. The children could not be consoled, the girls wailing and even the boys crying. So their father had Frieda stuffed, and here she stood to this day. Even though he laughed scoffingly, not sentimentally, the tale seemed more solemn than most of the tales of Dr. Uranus that I had heard during magic lessons and happy hours in Athens. Perhaps this was a precious memory since his father had died one Christmas season when Dr. Uranus was about 18. He had even told me once that he attributed to the untimely death of his father a feeling of loss in relating to his own children, saying “I don’t know how to be a father.” Whatever the case, there was still irony in his eyes and an undertone of satire in his voice as he told the tale of Frieda.

As soon as Clive arrived, we headed out to take the Falcon for a check-up and tune-up before the long trip back to Athens. I would follow Clive and Dr. Uranus to the service station. As we pulled out, I saw Uncle Otto standing by the barn watching us, arms straight down at his sides. I suppose he had already been paid for the car.

We had gone through three country intersections, when suddenly, the Falcon lost power, as though running out of gas. They pulled around in the little red Datsun, and Clive jumped out, popped the hood, moved a few belts and tubes, and climbed under the engine.

“We lost a piece to the fuel pump,” said Clive looking at the ground, eyes unmoving, not searching. “A little glass bowl is missing.” We had gone over a big bump at the last intersection, and sure enough, in the middle of the road there, the little glass bowl was laying cracked. At the station we found out that it would take a few days to order the part but that if we made the two-hour round trip to Indianapolis ourselves, we could have the car ready today. Clive would stay and help get the Falcon into the shop while Dr. Uranus and I would go get the glass bowl.

On the trip down to Indianapolis, we talked about our respective summers in Athens and Houston, and on the trip back, Dr. Uranus began asking about the trick I had been working on. As usual, his questions were a combination of curiosity and coaching: “Describe the effect as the audience sees it.”

“Well, guessing the number picked by a spectator.” I said, trying to give an unadorned answer.

“No, that’s the trick, the plot. What is the underlying effect?”

“Knowing what someone is thinking, mind reading.”

“Now focus that power to find the effect. What is the significance in the mind of the audience? How do people imagine this power?” On the loop, we flashed by billboards for Marlboro, Budweiser, Burger King, Pepsi.

“Some people still believe in psychics. It’s the whole mentalism problem, whether to use a disclaimer.”

“Forget the ethics for the moment. Let’s say the performance is clearly entertainment, like a horror movie.” I had thought about this issue before, had considered mental magic effects to be more like a haunted house on Halloween than a hoax poltergeist, more like carnival weight-guessing than palm reading.

“Maybe—even if it’s all a trick—the audience would think the magician could find out anything or could know embarrassing things…”

“So that effect is too broad, too strong. You need to limit the effect, focus on the magic moment.”

“Maybe the effect could be knowing a specific bit of information, just what someone is concentrating on. Or something everyone present needs to be visualizing. The power is telepathy, but the effect is receiving a single, telegraphic thought--like a multiple choice answer.”

“Now expand the plot within those limits. How can that effect be played out?”

“Of course, the performer could know what is picked from numbers in a row. Or from books on a shelf. Even colors of the rainbow. The planets!” It felt like an artifact emerging as an archeologist brushes away dirt and debris but like the concept had discovered me. It felt fitting, appropriate, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

“Now you have an effect, a plot that you can build into a routine and presentation, more than just a method or trick!”

In the excitement of the discussion, we had missed the exit for the highway back to Muncie. We had to get off the bypass, check the map at a Shell station, and turn around.

We finally returned the service station in Muncie, and between Clive and the mechanic, everything was done but popping the glass bowl onto the fuel pump. The test drive around Muncie was successful and we headed out the next morning for Athens, diving mostly on I-75. Going through Knoxville, Dr. Uranus took Exit 108 and pulled into a Waffle House. I pulled in beside him, exhilarated to be treated to lunch as well as to be so much closer to home where I could indulge in some cold beer.

Dr. Uranus reeled in our waitress Rhonda, perfectly timing pieces of information as she hustled among her customers, clearing plates, filling tea glasses and coffee cups: he was a psychology professor, I was a student, he studied untapped powers of the mind, and finally during a lull in her busyness, that I had invented a mind-reading trick. Well, Rhonda wanted to see that! At each request of Dr. Uranus, I stepped away from the table as Rhonda picked a number, then a color, and finally a planet. It felt as though the breath of life was entering my dusty method, my dirty secret. She squealed at each revelation, probably both excitable and looking forward to a nice tip.

Dr. Uranus was obviously doing some field research as he asked Rhonda which revelation she thought was the most difficult. She said that knowing what planet she named must be hardest. I imagine it had the effect of being harder because it was the closer—the final challenge—and captured the imagination more than numbers or colors, even though the actual possible selections were fewest—with 20 numbers, a dozen colors, and only nine planets. Planets were actually the easiest if considering only the pure effect and method.

We arrived back in Athens in the early evening and parked the car in the hidden driveway that dipped down behind an embankment next to the psychologically invisible house of Dr. Uranus. At least five cars would fit next to the stone wall at the bottom of the driveway next to the specially-designed landscape of ivy and hedges that blended with the wooden surfaces to create the optical illusion of perfect camouflage. Although I lived just down the street, Dr. Uranus dropped me off with my luggage in front of my place at Stiles apartments. I was unpacked and across the street picking up a twelve pack at Five Points Bottle Shop within minutes. My summer adventure was finally over.

The Presentation

Dr. Uranus wanted to try out the new effect at the Athens Magic Guild, which was meeting at Express Pizza this month because Mama Sid’s Pizza was being remodeled. This pizza and pub was also closed on Sundays due to blue laws, so Papa Sid was able to arrange the substitute location through some kind of pizza connection. I often came to Express, as we called it, for cheap pitchers and pinball and a few years later would frequent the place with Greg Thornton who would come here to party with his brother and the UGA rugby team. We entered through the glass door in the glass store front, under the familiar emblem of a train engine billowing steam. The pub had the illusion of being smaller—empty and silent. The pinball machines and video games were dark. We gathered tonight in the back bar area: Papa Sid, a middle-school teacher, a couple of college students who I didn’t know, a local podiatrist, Dr. Granrose who taught philosophy at UGA, Dr. Uranus, and me.

Papa Sid officially opened the meeting, but it was obvious as always that Dr. Granrose and Dr. Uranus had the real knowledge and authority of magic. All of us—including Papa Sid—happily received their coaching and critiques because magic secrets and information were even harder to come by in those days before the Internet. The unwritten rule was that everyone who attended a meeting should come prepared to share something—a new trick or presentation, some bit of magic history or theory. The podiatrist told a few stories from a recent magic conference, and, as his offering, the middle-school teacher told about seeing Tom Mullica’s cigarette routine last weekend at Tom Foolery’s in Atlanta. I gave a show-and-tell with a new booklet I had bought at a magic convention in Atlanta the previous spring: *Secrets and Mysteries for the Close-Up Performer* by Eugene Burger. Dr. Granrose then asked if anyone was prepared to perform any actual effects.

First the two college buddies showed a trick with rubber bands that had been recently popularized by David Copperfield. EFFECT: a very visual penetration ensued as two rubber bands stretched tightly across the fingers, one on each hand, seemed to melt through each other. PRESENTATION: None.

Next Papa Sid did a classic of magic. EFFECT: little bunnies made of sponge hopped magically from hand to hand, finally multiplying in a volunteers hand with many little baby sponge bunnies. PRESENTATION: Corny bunny reproduction jokes.

Then Dr. Granrose performed a fantastic open prediction. EFFECT: A volunteer dealt cards down and stopped freely on a random card. The card matched one in a sealed envelope. PRESENTATION: Granrose gave a grand introduction, talking about the open prediction being the holy grail of magicians, as archetypal as the soothsayer from Julius Caesar prophesying, “Beware the Ides of March!” The whole proceeding would probably have been entertaining even outside of the magic club.

Finally, Dr. Uranus performed the new effect. He directly revealed a card, a number, and a color visualized by the group. He began by telling how Ted Annemann, one of the classical mentalists, wore a gold onyx signet ring with one small emblem: a question mark, which signified the twilight haze between theater actors and charlatans, between the art of fiction and the technology of deception, a realm once occupied by magic shows before magicians were debunked and cast down to the earth, now crawling in the dust, reduced to materialism, as low as prop comics and jugglers. To reclaim the lost mystery of the question mark, Dr. Uranus continued, the emphasis of mental effects must shift with the perception and culture of the audience, must maintain ambiguity by giving science to romantics and giving myth to realists.

Some weeks later, Dr. Barks was having a few people over and had invited Dr. Uranus, who brought me along to see him try out the new effect. Excepting the added presence of Dr. Uranus, the whole scene would be familiar to me: I knew Dr. Barks as he had taught my creative writing class over in Park Hall last spring, and I had been over to his house with his son Ben Barks, one of the five-points crew who often hung out at the Den of Decadence, as I had dubbed the party house where the four Disciples of Decadence lived just down the street. I was familiar with the Barks’ yard—wild with trees, vines, and underbrush, looking at night like a Van Gogh painting--on the corner where incline of Westview Drive peaked just next door to Dr. Uranus. I was familiar with the Miller Light War, as Dr. Barks and Dr. Uranus had moved an empty aluminum can with careful tactics back and forth over the indiscernible no-man’s land between their yards, whether in postmodern irony or classic poetic justice, I don’t know to this day. Years ago the can was littered from some passing pickup truck, and presumably, the two professors had been trading it in incrementally longer chess moves ever since. Walking over to the Barks house, Dr. Uranus paused to pick up the can and place it down a few feet away from the dirt driveway, as if arranging a rock garden. We went up the wooden stairs through the large screened porch to the back door.

Dr. Barks answered the door with the long hair and wild beard of a Tennessee prophet, the transcendental eyes of a guru, and he welcomed us with a warm mixture of Southern and Persian hospitality. He was himself an inspiring poet, and he would later become somewhat famous by interpreting the poems of Rumi. Providing a beer for me and wine for Dr. Uranus, he led us into the living room, a bachelor pad filled with books, frameless modern art prints, Asian masks, African drums—not decorations but stacked and piled, as though in use or recently set aside. Ben Barks actually set aside a rectangular wooden drum as we walked in.

The gathering in no way seemed arranged, either: Ben Barks and neighborhood friend Randy Hartman were sitting in a corner, and scattered about the room were a librarian, a found-object artist, some musicians, and the local poet Ed Weeks. The guests might just as well have walked over from happy hour at the Light House in five points. The artist seemed to be finishing up a monologue on tribal costumes with Dr. Barks smoothly re-entering the conversation saying that clothing was part of what made us human, the robes of priests—for example—symbolizing glory and good works: only in paradise were humans naked and unashamed. Misused for superficial image and fashion statements, Barks explained, clothing was actually meant to express true identity and an inner reality. The conversation intrigued me, probably validating my decision become an English major.

After a while, Dr. Uranus easily guided the conversation to the mystical, asking if any of the guests had ever experienced premonitions, perhaps a natural inquiry for a psychology professor. The librarian said she sometimes had dreams that came true. Dr. Barks said that all real poetry was prophetic.

“I take the scientific approach,” said Dr. Uranus, his voice getting about 10% louder like the TV commercials. This was his segue into the new effect. “Dr. Rhine, for example, at Duke University has done empirical studies on telepathy, and I have had a few successful experiments myself.” I wanted to laugh as he paused for human nature to take its course.

Feigning reluctance at the general encouragement and the librarian’s special insistence, Dr. Uranus laid out nine books on the floor and asked for one to be selected while his head was turned. Ed Weeks pointed to a paperback edition of *The Zimmer Poems*. Dr. Uranus turned around with his eyes still closed, and verbalizing his mental process of elimination, ruled out the three hard-cover textbooks, three modern novels, a dictionary, and a fat paperback edition of *The Golden Bough*, finally arriving at the correct choice. He was in character, a slightly exaggerated version of himself as a professor, teaching a lesson.

He revealed a number picked by the artist—my original plot—as well as the favorite color of one of the musicians. For the big finish, he drew the five Zener shapes used by Dr. Rhine--the circle, cross, wavy lines, square, and star—on the back of a business card, asking the librarian to circle one. He left the room for true test conditions. This time only miming the process of uncertainty and mental constipation, he drew out the star shape which, of course, proved to be a match. He slumped, acting a little exhausted, in his seat.

“What does it feel like?” asked the librarian.

“To explain would be like describing colors to a blind person,” said Dr. Uranus, seeming to present the effect as a real phenomenon I’m not sure if he thought his approach was innocent entertainment or an educational test for anyone foolish enough to believe him. He did, however, close with the same frame he used to begin: “I assure you that my methods are purely scientific and psychological. I take the scientific approach.”

Dr. Barks had the calm peace of a Maharishi. Perhaps he was tolerant even of tricksters and so left Dr. Uranus unchallenged or was merely undisturbed, not distracted by spectacle and special effect. Perhaps only the unenlightened demanded a sign. Nonetheless, when we later left the little party, Dr. Uranus was energized, animated.

“You have got to help me do this for Granrose’s philosophy class next Friday at four o’clock,” he said. “He scheduled me after the last magic meeting. But now I think both the verisimilitude and the drama is better with a spokesperson. The presenter needs to be a separate entity from the one with the super human power. I’ll act as MC, and you can do the effect.”

“It’s a game weekend,” I said. “I have to work.” I was fairly well glad that I was scheduled to work as I still had intense stage fright in those days.

Dr. Uranus was thoughtful. He really wanted the ethos and impact of a spokesperson presenting a paranormal subject. He said his 12-year old daughter Carrie would be in town from Savannah next week and asked if I would help coach her. Considering further, he said having her perform might even enhance the presentation, so I agreed.

As I met with them a few times over the next week, Carrie was eager and happy to join in the performance. Once when I met with her alone, she confided in me that she had never shared any interests in sports or hobbies with her father. She smiled as she told me this was the first time she had done anything with him that seemed so important to him. It turns out that they would perform the effect many times over the years, resulting in a series of happy father-daughter dates.

Even though set as part of a regular class period, the performance actually received some promotion—an ad in the college newspaper,the *Red and Black*, and several spots on the college radio station WUOG. Dr. Granrose and Dr. Uranus were spreading word among the faculty. The lecture would be held in the South PJ auditorium, across from Memorial Hall and the old student center.

A video camera was set up at the back of the lecture hall, so I have seen the whole performance on video several times over the years. On the day of the performance, Dr. Uranus stepped confidently to the podium as Carrie waited close to the chalk board with school-girl hair, preppy purple skirt, and white blouse. “Normally we turn down requests for public performances as we have no desire for fame and publicity and don’t want to feel like freaks of nature. In fact, my daughter Carrie is very shy and I had to bribe her with promises of candy to be here today.” There was general laughter, subdued but scattered across the hall. “But we are here at the request of Dr. Granrose to provide a simple demonstration for a philosophical exercise and an opportunity for critical thinking.

“We simply bring you food for thought and ask that you be the judge of what you see.” Dr. Uranus paused significantly, perhaps anchoring this disclaimer, and began the spiel. “I do want to suggest, though, that perhaps the field of genetics has much to learn from those who lie outside the bell curves of human mutation, who have strangely developed regions of the brain! The mental ability that we will demonstrate for you today is shared by several generations of my family. My brother, for example, sometimes helped the police with crime scene information, and my uncle had visions of the distant world war. I first realized I had unusual mental abilities when I was 12, when I played Go Fish with my brother and sisters and could tell what cards they were holding. Recently, my daughter turned 12, and she has been able to develop the same startling skill: when several people concentrate, she can read simple thoughts—colors, numbers, shapes!

The presentation played well. With Carrie’s back turned, Dr. Uranus had students pick from a row of books, write numbers on the board, choose colors and planets. He asked everyone to concentrate to help Carrie, as if they were doing community service. Carrie was truly shy and uncertain and very cute. She was clearly gratified when she answered correctly and was praised by her father. The students were enchanted, radiant. Like the popular culture gambit of mixing genres observed by Robert the Boy Wonder, Dr. Uranus had somehow combined the paranormal urban legend with the heartwarming family drama. For the big finish, he set Carrie up as trying something she had never done before: after the well-rehearsed struggle and quickly-retracted mistake, she named a number that had been picked from 1 to 100.

Dr. Granrose opened the floor up for discussion. A couple sorority sisters asked Carrie what grade she was in and how long she had been able to do these things. Carrie was somehow able to both be honest and stay in character: “I’ve just been able to do this for a short time.” Some students seemed to accept the presentation at face value, claiming phenomenon like this was possible, such as one student who said his twin brother sometimes shared his thoughts and feelings; many students, however, were skeptical. The bright light of the college lecture hall was perhaps too stark for the effect—critical thinking from psychology class, scientific method from biology. Better evidence was needed, some said. ESP was a myth--like UFOs, horoscopes, Big Foot.

Suddenly, out from behind the video camera on its tripod at the back of the room, the cameraman Mark Mason appeared, being familiar to me as another English major. Coming to stage center, making sure he was in frame, he began to rail at the other students: “How can you doubt this? You’ve heard about this kind of thing and now you have seen it with your own eyes. There is no way a college professor would publicly deceive university students. He could lose his job. On top of that, no father is going to turn his little girl into a fraud. Can’t you see this is the real deal?” Still visibly moved, Mark returned to filming as Dr. Granrose came to the podium.

“We have had a great discussion here,” said Dr. Granrose to quiet the room. “For the writing assignment, I want everyone to report on the demonstration we have seen from a philosophical perspective. You might consider epistemology--how we attain knowledge or justify belief. Be sure to refer to idealism, empiricism, skepticism, and to some of the philosophers we have been studying.

“Dr. Uranus and Carrie, I want to thank you for coming today and giving us this thought-provoking demonstration!” Dr. Granrose gave a gesture that began as a wave toward the guests but ended as a clear applause cue. The students, grateful for the show and happy that class was over, responded with enthusiastic clapping. They gathered their books and headed to their next classes.

In that performance captured on video tape, the effect reached a kind of perfected evolutionary stage. I performed the effect myself at a Christmas party at the invisible house, Dr. Uranus again playing the role of spokesperson as I played the reluctant test subject. The effect was a solid part of my repertoire by spring when *The Return of the Jedi* came out, about the time I made one of my infrequent calls to Kregg in Houston, when the subject of the new effect came up.

I remembered the last time I saw Kregg in his military-cut red hair, still on the porch laughing with Robert the Boy Wonder as Bruce and I pulled out of the gate of Semper Fi Lawn Care and headed toward Texarkana. At that time, the trick was just empty technology, bare-bones method, not fleshed out, not dressed up, a mere naturalistic force without soul or grace.

“Do you remember when you tried your new magic trick before you left, and it didn’t work the second time?” Kregg asked.

“Yes. I still don’t know how I got that wrong.”

“Robert didn’t write a number down. He left the paper blank.” Now I understood what had happened. I would have to work that kind of anomaly into my system.

I didn’t see Kregg again until I stopped over in Houston on my way to China in 1999, when we would see the Star Wars prequel, Episode 1—22 years after we had waited hours in the long lines at Memorial City Mall to see the original movie in high school and two years before Kregg would call me up in China to tell me he had taken “the big dunk,” speaking in code to avoid talk of politics or religion over the CPC-tapped phone lines. Like Darth Vader at the end of Episode 6 and like me in 1991, Kregg had left the Dark Side. What Kregg had said ironically of me to some friends during that last visit was now true for him as well: “Yoda got to him.”