



FOLK MAGIC

THREE CARD TRICKS FROM THE MEME POOL

JARED KOPF

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Jared Kopf



DARK ARTS PRESS

For
Laynie and Martin

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THINK & STOP

“My grandfather was right. He said that you should never bet on a sure thing!”

— Hugard & Braue¹

It was the summer of 1988, and I was a four-year-old Texan visiting my grandparents in New York for the first time. My memory of that season is a happy fog. Grass the color of old dollar bills. The foreign, wet smell of Long Island. The cicadas’ din washing out every other detail. But something remains so vivid I can almost touch it.

I’m sitting on the second-story back porch eating toast. It might be midday. It’s probably the weekend because my grandfather, Harold, isn’t hidden away in his tool-and-die workshop down the basement stairs that I’m not allowed to climb. He’s just finished playing cribbage or gin with Uncle Drew, I think. He shows me a compass and how it can scratch a perfect pink circle in a piece of carbon paper. Then, he shows

¹ Hugard, Jean, and Frederick Braue. *The Royal Road to Card Magic*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948, p. 139.

me a card trick. I already love cards. I'm good at Go Fish; at least I think I am. But I've never seen magic before.

"Pick one but don't show me," he says.

I pick one. It's the Jack of Clubs.

"Put it back," he says.

I put it back, and he cuts the cards over and over.

"Do you know where it is?"

"No, Grandpa."

"Good. Neither do I. And I don't know what your card is, do I?"

"No."

"I'm going to deal through these," he says.

"Don't say a word."

My grandfather begins to deal the cards face up to the table. He gets through about half the pack before he reaches my card, but he passes it and deals five or six more before he stops and smiles.

"If the next card I turn over is the one you picked, Jared, I get the last piece of toast."

I love toast, and he knows it. I think it's perfectly stale bread. *Staled by the wind*, I think. I know he's passed my card. *Poor Grandpa*.

"What do I get if you're wrong?" I ask.

"Whatever you want."

"Okay, Grandpa."

He smiles at me. I feel nothing but love and confidence. His dramatic pause is long enough for me to consider the cicadas buzzing on the trees. They annoy and comfort me at the same time. I imagine the

taste of the last slice of buttered toast. I wonder what I'll get from the grocery store's toy aisle. I've been eyeing a pair of real-looking handcuffs, but I can have whatever I want. . . .

Grandpa reaches to the spread of cards on the table and turns the Jack of Clubs face down.

My jaw goes slack. I look at him. He winks at me, snatches the last piece of toast, and walks away, taking the rest of 1988 with him.

* * *

My grandfather's card trick did not get me into magic. Indeed, at the time, I thought he was the only man in the world who could do what he showed me. He never taught me how the trick worked, and I never asked.

It was a few years later, after becoming seriously interested in magic, that I discovered the method to his little con. I don't remember which book tipped the secret, but it was surely one of many that I borrowed from the public library. To put it simply, he had secretly learned the bottom card of the deck, and when I returned my Jack of Clubs, he cleverly placed his memorized card directly above it. No matter how many times he gave the pack a straight cut, those two cards would never become separated.²

² A single straight cut can separate the cards by sending the memorized card to the bottom and the selected card to the top; but they're technically still next to each other in the cycle.

In magic parlance this principle is known as the “Key Card.” Thousands of pages in magic literature have been devoted to the subject; and though the basic idea couldn’t seem simpler, there are countless sophisticated ways of exploiting the Key Card’s power.

Years later, I discovered that my grandfather’s presentation was also far from original. In their seminal collection of advanced card magic, *Expert Card Technique*, Hugard and Braue reveal the potential origins of this Key Card effect:

This old, old trick is the familiar Circus Card Trick, an ancient snare used by circus grifters against the gullible and the greedy. It is still a good trick and can be very amusing when used against the man from Missouri. It need hardly be added that the conjurer does not permit the spectator to pay his “loss” in the wager.³

The Circus Card Trick is the perfect example of folk magic. Like the two other effects explained in this pamphlet, the Circus Card Trick has no identifiable inventor. These magic “memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain.”⁴ They thrive in the minds of millions of people like my grandfather, who likely lost a bet to a buddy at the bar

³ Hugard, Jean, and Frederick Braue. *Expert Card Technique*. 3rd ed. New York: George Starke, 1940, 1950, p. 398.

⁴ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. 30th Anniversary ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, 2006, p. 192.

and then later learned the secret having coughed up the money for the next round of drinks.

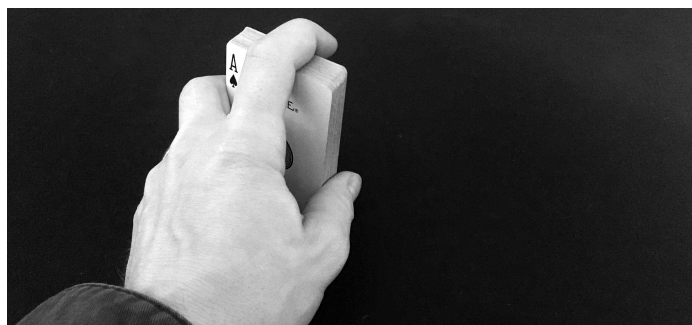
I've performed this and similar tricks countless times, and here I will offer a few simple touches that not only add shade to the method, but also elevate the effect from a devilish swindle to a real piece of magic.

* * *

Instead of presenting this as a challenge or wager, you will apparently read the mind of your participant with nothing more than your powers of observation.

"Psychologists say that over ninety percent of face-to-face communication is nonverbal. At times, it seems as if human beings can communicate telepathically. This is probably just an illusion, of course. Let's try an experiment with these playing cards. Here, give them a thorough shuffle."

Once your participant finishes shuffling, take the pack from her and square the cards by tapping their short ends on the table. Under the cover of this natural action, secretly glimpse the bottom card of the deck. Let's assume the Ace of Spades is your Key Card.



Spread the cards and have her select any card she wishes. If she takes the bottom card, you're way ahead because you already know what it is.

Once she has noted her selection, begin to cut small packets of cards to the table, one on top of the other, forming a haphazard pile.



"I'll drop the cards to the table like this. Please tell me to stop whenever you like."

Once she tells you to stop cutting, have her place her selection on top of the pile on the table. Then, place the rest of your cards on top of her selection, burying it in the middle. Your Key Card is now surreptitiously above her selected card.

Pick up the deck and hold it in dealing position. Give the deck a straight cut, placing about half to the table and then dropping the rest on top, and say, *"Alice, pick up the cards and cut them like this so that you have no idea where your card is."*

As she cuts, observe how well she follows your instructions. If she cuts them well, you can tell her to pick up the cards and cut them again while you turn away, saying, *"I'll look away so that there's no way I know*

even the approximate location of your selection. I don't want either of us to know where it is. We want this experiment to be as close to double-blind as possible."

Pick up the cards and square them, again by tapping their short ends on the table. This will allow you to glimpse the bottom card. If you see your Key Card (in our example, the Ace of Spades), you know that her selection is the top card, which you could sell as your effect right away.⁵ If you don't see your Key Card, continue as follows.

"In a moment, Alice, I'm going to deal the cards face up to the table one at a time. You will look at the cards, and I will look at you. If you see your selection, try not to have any reaction. However, the moment you see it, I want you to think the word 'stop.' Don't say it aloud. Just think it. Do you understand?"

Once she indicates her understanding, begin to deal the cards face up to the table in an overlapping row.



⁵ E.g., *"Believe it or not, Alice: even though you lost your card in the pack, you have kept track of your selection as if by some kind of psychic intuition. Just turn over the top card and see for yourself."*

Be sure to look at her most of the time and only glance down every five cards or so to check for your Key Card.

If you find yourself dealing for some time, you can break up the monotony by pausing the deal and cheekily saying, *“The word we’re going for is ‘stop,’ remember?”* This implies that you know she hasn’t thought ‘stop’ yet, which is an effect in itself.

Once you reach the key card or glance down to see that you passed it, continue dealing a card or two and say, *“I felt something a moment ago. You just thought ‘stop,’ didn’t you? . . . Not here, but a few cards back. Is that right?”*

She will reply affirmatively.

Feign a few more seconds of difficulty and then remove from the spread the card that follows your Key Card, saying, *“You thought ‘stop’ right here.”*



WILSON'S PICNIC

You should also be conversant with one of the so-called systems of fortune telling by cards and know the significance attributed to each card in the pack.

— Al Baker⁶

By the time I was eight years old, I thought I knew a lot about magic tricks. I studied every book I could get my hands on, and soon I had a pretty solid repertoire of impromptu tricks with everyday objects. My love of playing cards was stronger than ever, and I was never without a pack.

Around that time, I was visiting my cousin Robin in New Mexico. We sat on my uncle's couch, and I showed her a few of my best tricks. Impressed by her younger cousin's attempts at legerdemain she said, "Those are pretty good. Do you know this one?"

Robin took the cards and turned her back for a moment to set something up. Despite her rather obvious preparation, she performed a card trick that

⁶ Baker, Al. *Al Baker's Mental Magic: Thirty Effects*. Minneapolis: Carl W. Jones, 1949, p. 80.

fooled me so badly that I remember it as an early lesson in the pitfalls of hubris.

Luckily for me, after I picked my bruised ego off the floor, my older cousin did what no magician should ever do: she tipped her trick. It meant nothing to her, but it meant (and still means) so much to me.

Here's what Robin did. She handed me the cards and told me to cut them into four piles, which I did. She instructed me to take the first pile and place the top three cards to the bottom and then deal the next three cards onto the three remaining piles, one card on each. She had me repeat this process with the remaining three piles. When I finished, she turned the top card of each pile face up, revealing all four Aces.

I would later find out this trick was published as "A Poker Player's Picnic" in *The Royal Road to Card Magic*,⁷ a book I thought I had studied thoroughly. I must have skipped the trick thinking it was too remedial for an "expert" like me. Now that I know better, I've also realized that it's one of those folk card tricks without a known inventor. Robin hadn't read it in a book, of course. A friend had shown it to her. Someone else had shown it to her friend. And so on.

How does it work? When Robin blatantly turned her back, she removed the four Aces and secretly placed them on top. Then, by following the requisite algorithmic process (which I will describe in detail

⁷ Hugard, Jean, and Frederick Braue. *The Royal Road to Card Magic*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948, pp. 16-18.

below), I unwittingly distributed the Aces on top of each pile.

A quarter century later, I was having a jam session with my dear friend and colleague John Wilson. Not particularly keen on “four-Ace” tricks, John told me about a variation of “A Poker Player’s Picnic” that he developed soon after reading it in *Royal Road*. His wrinkle and its powerful presentation appear in this small collection with his kind permission.

* * *

John’s version changes the effect from a mere production of Aces (which is ultimately a meaningless and vain display of the magician’s skill) into a powerful “reading.” He uses the cards to reveal poetical possibilities about the participant’s life and fortune, and then he comes over the top with the kicker ending. Best of all, this excellent variation requires no secret setup. You simply hand the pack to someone and have her shuffle the cards.

“If you’ve ever had your fortune told, you know that cartomancers usually have you shuffle to put your soul into the cards. How quaint. Please mix the pack.”

Once she has finished shuffling, take the cards from your participant and spread them between your hands so that you can look through their faces. Spread them widely enough so that you can see the card at the rear of the pack (i.e., the top card when the pack is face down). Let’s say you see the Jack of Spades. Spread

through the deck and remove its mate⁸ (i.e., the Jack of Clubs). Place it face down on the table to your right.



Do the same thing with the second card from the rear (e.g., the Five of Diamonds); find its mate (the Five of Hearts) and place it face down on the table to the left of the first card. Repeat this with the next card (e.g., the Ten of Spades); remove its mate (the Ten of Clubs) and place it face down to the left of the others. Finally, note the fourth card from the rear (e.g., the Queen of Hearts), remove its mate (the Queen of Diamonds), and place it face down to the left of the other three.



⁸ In magic terms, a “mate” is a card that shares the same color and value as another.

Hand the pack to the participant and tell her to cut off a small packet of cards and place it in front of the card on your far left. Have her cut off another small packet and place it front of the card to the right of the first card, followed by another packet in front of the next card to your right. Finally, have her place the remaining cards in front of the card on your far right.

Point to the packet on your far right and say, *“Now that we have the four piles, let’s mix things up a bit further. Pick up this pile and move the top three cards to the bottom.”*

Once she does that, point to the three remaining piles from your right to your left and say, *“And deal one card on top of each of these other packets.”*

Point to the packet that’s second from your right and say, *“Now pick up this packet, place the top three cards to the bottom, and then deal one card on top of each of the remaining packets.”*

Again, be sure she deals from your right to your left.

Now, pointing to the third packet from your right, say, *“And this one: three to the bottom, then one, two, three,”* indicating, again, a dealing sequence from your right to your left.

Finally, have her pick up the last packet, and repeat the process of putting the top three cards to the bottom, followed by dealing the next three cards, from your right to your left, onto the three tabled packets.

“So, you’ve shuffled these thoroughly and put all your soul into it. Then you mixed them further through a

little ritual passed down from one fortune teller to the next. Let's see what four cards fate has to show you."

Turn the top card of each packet face up. You will now interpret the cards as a "psychic," relying on a system of cartomancy to describe the meaning of each card. Any system will do, of course, because all of them are as valid and invalid as each other. The point is to use a system of some kind and stick to it. John recommends interpreting Clubs as Health, Spades as Work, Hearts as Love, and Diamonds as Money. The numerical values from Ace to Ten simply "mean" few to many, weak to strong, etc. And the Jacks, Queens, and Kings represent people: e.g., children, women, and men.

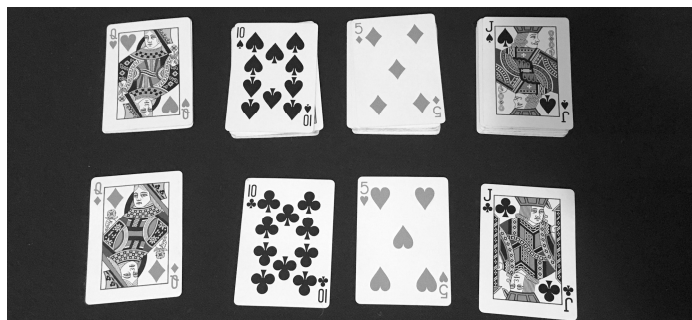
You must also consider the person for whom you are working. All good "psychics" and charlatans, whether they realize it or not, become good at cold-reading their sitters. This can affect what the cards "mean" as much as the applied system.

With those interpretations in mind, the reading for the cards in our example above might go something like this:

"In the Jack of Spades I see a young person working to achieve a serious goal. The Five of Diamonds would indicate that she is motivated, at least at first, by money, which — according to the Ten of Spades — could double as long as she doubles her efforts. Should she put in the necessary work, she could become the loving sovereign of her domain, so to speak, which is what the Queen of Hearts might indicate."

Once the reading is complete, wrap up the effect by saying, *"Of course, all of this could be nonsense. I like to think we are in control of our lives and that fate is something we imagine only in retrospect. Unless I'm wrong, which means everything could be meant to be as if it were preordained."*

All that's left to do is to turn over the four face-down cards you removed at the beginning and show that they perfectly match the four cards she cut to herself.



BEHOLDEN TO WHOM?

The simplest sleight, if well rigged up with either plausible or nonsensical clap-trap, may be made to provide a most astonishing and elaborate card trick; whereas, if the sleight be exhibited alone, the effect is not at all commensurate with the time and labor spent in acquiring the skill.

— S.W. Erdnase⁹

The three tricks in this collection are not only part of a folk tradition; they also require only a modest proficiency with the pasteboards, a feature which certainly aided their survival as magical memes. I've run into dozens of amateur conjurors over the years who, like my grandfather, knew only one or two tricks. Almost every one of them drew from the same small pool of effects that require little or no sleight of hand.

Our first two effects don't rely on any sleights. There's nothing really flashy about them, and yet they always resonate with people, even if poorly performed. When a thoughtful, imaginative artist wields them, they create magic as real as any curse or blessing.

⁹ Erdnase, S.W. *The Expert at the Card Table*. Canada: Self-published, 1902, p. 171.

Our third entry relies on a simple sleight that superficially seems easy to execute but is actually a perfectly layered piece of visual manipulation and time misdirection. It's a "move" that requires a certain grace and moxie to pull off well.

When Johnny Thompson (a.k.a. "The Great Tomsoni") taught the very first amateur magic seminars ever held aboard a cruise ship, he never failed to teach the simple sleight known as the Cross-the-cut Force, first published by Max Holden in his trick, "The New Knife and Selected Cards."¹⁰ There are, however, reasons to believe that the technique was already a ripe, old dodge when Holden was trouping around in magic.¹¹

Tomsoni would have the deck freely shuffled, and in the course of taking back the deck and squaring it, he would secretly glimpse the bottom card.¹² After learning the bottom card, Tomsoni would place the deck on the table and tell the participant to cut the deck in half.

At this point the Cross-the-cut Force's subtle power would begin to come into play. As described by Holden, Tomsoni would pick up the original lower half of the deck and set it crosswise on the original upper half. Then — after a taking a few moments to

¹⁰ Maven, Max. "Cross-the-cut Force." *Conjuring Credits* (citing, Bagshawe, Edward, ed. "The New Knife and Selected Cards." *The Magical Monthly*, July 1925, pp. 199-200).

¹¹ See *ibid.*

¹² See p. 9 *supra* (using the same technique for learning a Key Card).

introduce his lie-detection theme and to allow just enough time to pass for history to become a haze — Tomsoni would return attention to the pack and instruct the participant to lift the crossed section and take a peek at the card on the face. This was, of course, the original bottom card.¹³ The participant could shuffle the deck, apparently destroying all the evidence.



With the uncanny flair of a polished Polish prestidigitator, Tomsoni would take the participant's pulse at the wrist and proceed to give him the third degree. The participant could lie or tell the truth, but because he already knew the card's identity, Tomsoni could correctly sniff out any lies and ultimately divine the card.

How would you present this? When you can answer this question in a way that satisfies your artistic sensibilities, you will be a wizard. Be careful and be kind.

¹³ You can see how easy it would be to secretly learn the top card of the deck and force that one instead. I'll let you work out the details. As Dr. Elliott would say, "Be natural and use your head."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JARED KOPF is a classically trained conjuror. He performs magic for audiences all over the world, from New York City to Tokyo. He lives in Texas with his wife, Elayna, and son, Martin.

