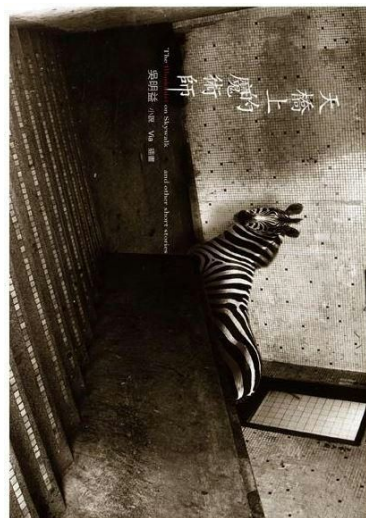


# THE ILLUSIONIST ON THE SKYWALK 天橋上的魔術師

*The Illusionist on the Skywalk* is a collection of ten short stories that take place in the seventies at the famous Chunghua shopping centre in Taipei. The shopping centre consisted of eight buildings in a row. The skywalks connecting the buildings are prominent in these stories, with childhood memories of the shopping centre as a central theme. The protagonists, narrators and perspectives are all different in each of the stories, but personae that appear in one story sometimes appear in another as passers-by. Besides this, memories also create a continuity that makes it seem that the narrators have overlapping memories despite their different pasts. Spinning memories into stories becomes magic, and the narrator skilfully demonstrates his tricks in a marvellous illusion of disappearances, reappearances and invisibility. The last story sheds new light on the stories, making the reader want to re-read them again and again.

## Wu Ming-Yi 吳明益

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# THE ILLUSIONIST ON THE SKYWALK

By Wu Ming-Yi. Translated by Dave Haysom.

'Business savvy just doesn't run in the blood,' my mum often says—a statement which contains 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. It would hardly have come across as very authentic, or persuasive, to have some kid addressing the customers with lines like 'You look great in this pair;' 'That's real leather;' 'I'll make it a bit cheaper, just for you;' 'Gosh, I really can't go any lower than that.' But one year, my mum came up with an idea. You can go to the Skywalk, 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—but 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 Skywalk between them, and another to Benevolence. I preferred the Skywalk between Love and Trust, because it was longer. The far end was in Ximending, and on the bridge itself there were peddlers selling everything: ice cream, children's clothing, baked seed cakes, Wacoal brand underwear, goldfish, turtles—I even saw someone selling a kind of blue crab that we called water monks. The police sometimes came to harass the peddlers, but there were just too many routes down from the Skywalk—the peddlers often bundled up their stuff and nipped off to the toilet before returning. Never mind the fact that the police usually approached at a dawdle, 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 Skywalk, gave me a rice ball, and left. I tied the laces in pairs on the Skywalk 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 insoles that we called 'noisy skins' at the very front, because they were the most expensive—thirty bucks a pair. My mum said they were made from pigskin. They had a pungent kind of aroma, and 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 a noise!

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

Opposite me 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 the tall ones 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—business would definitely be good.

This man had drawn an arc on the ground in chalk, spread out a black cloth, and laid out his wares according to their type. At first I couldn't tell what he was selling: there were playing cards, linked rings, strange notebooks... My aunt said he sold magic tricks. Wow—my stall was opposite a guy selling magic tricks!

'Actually no—I am a illusionist.' This was how he introduced himself. I once asked where his products were sold wholesale, and he replied, '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 illusionist didn't wear a tailcoat like the illusionists on TV, and he didn't have a top hat either. Every day he wore the same woollen jacket with the collar turned up, grey trousers, and filthy paratrooper boots. Next time, I thought, I'd recommend some liquid boot polish to him—one wipe of that and they'd be gleaming. His face was perhaps a little squarish, and maybe a little long as well. Neither tall nor short, he looked like the kind of person who'd forgotten what laughter was. Once he entered a crowd, there was nothing to distinguish him from anyone else—that was the kind of inconspicuous illusionist he was. Nothing, that is, apart from those eyes, and that pair of zipless paratrooper boots.

The illusionist put on a show about once an hour. I was so lucky to be selling insoles opposite him. 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 an illusionist. 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, he would give it a shake—and the illusionist 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 illusionist. 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, as he continued to talk—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.

Sometimes when he was doing magic his eyes would begin to gleam; he was still the illusionist in the woollen jacket with the collar turned up, in those grey trousers and filthy paratrooper boots, but in that moment his whole person glowed, 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 also sold tricks. The time came when I could no longer resist the temptation to use money from the insole sales to buy one of them. The first one I got was 'the dice of mystery'. After buying a trick from the illusionist 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 mother'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 illusionist 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 of his most profound secrets—just like I thought I knew what love was when I was eleven years old and developed 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 he had seen through the trick even before I'd finished loading them into the box.

'You turn the number you want towards yourself, right?' he said with a look of disdain.

'Right.' I was devastated. 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 Ma,' my brother said. I had indeed 'appropriated' some of the insoles money, 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 had to skim money from the insole earnings for a whole week before I'd had enough.

But the funny thing was that even though I'd discovered there was no magic to it, whenever I saw the illusionist clap his hands and yell, I let go of any feeling that I had been hoodwinked. I was lured in by the illusionist's trickery time and again. Again and again I bought those tricks which—back then—seemed impossibly precious. There was an empty matchbox that could become a full matchbox; a picture book whose black outlines suddenly filled with colour; a ball-point pen that drew in as many colours as a rainbow; a mysteriously pliable copper coin... Every trick was the same: in the moment the illusionist performed them, 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 realised the same reasoning applies to more or less everything.

This, combined with my lack of practice, meant that the magic tricks were pretty much a disaster for me, and relatives or neighbours were always laughing at me.

'You've been had, idiot child.' When my mother found out I'd stolen money to buy 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 had all bought the same tricks. I wasn't the least bit angry because I had been cheated out of my money—I was confident I just needed a bit more practice—but the feeling that everyone else had their hands on the secret piece of paper was truly unbearable. Several times I was tempted to give the illusionist a piece of my mind, but I only ever dared vent my anger in my mother's presence, irritating her to the point that 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 illusionist eventually began to dwindle. This was inevitable—although passersby might still browse his stall, the children in the area had already bought all the tricks. At first they tried to prevent their neighbours and classmates doing likewise by telling them it was all fake, but everyone bought them in the end. There are some things you have to try for yourself before you can know the feeling of being cheated, right?

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

He put this little black man on the ground, and within the big circle that had been marked around his stall, he drew another circle about the size of a fan with some yellow chalk, before closing his eyes and muttering an incantation. The little black man suddenly shook from side to side, as if he'd just woken up, and rose to his feet. At first the passersby continued to hurry past, but, as though they heard the little black man's silent summons, they couldn't help but turn back for a look. Once they discovered the little black man on the ground, their footsteps unconsciously slowed to a halt.

The little man leapt and danced in a bumbling sort of way, dashing this way and that in time with the illusionist's chanting, sing-song voice. His movements were endearing, although somewhat clumsy, as if 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 man; if he were ever made to take part in a gym class he would surely find himself in mortal peril.

I gradually worked out that the scope of the little man's activity was limited to the confines of that yellow circle. Were anyone to try and touch the little black man, the illusionist would stop their hand with a loud and threatening cry: 'Those who touch him will suffer misfortune, but those who watch him dance will have good luck.' The little black man didn't look like he wanted to be touched, either—if anyone came near he would scuttle back to the illusionist's heel. 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. He would slowly pace around the edge, looking as though he had something on his mind.

Once everyone had been drawn in by the little man, the illusionist would begin his usual 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 snapped up, and the crowd began to appreciate the illusionist's tricks once more. 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. The illusionist's little man grew famous. Now it was not just the children from the market, but all the children from our primary school who came to the Skywalk. 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, all made the trip to the Skywalk to see the illusionist's little man. He was still a little shy, but he continued to dance that 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. Every day I looked forward to seeing the dance so much so that I sometimes forgot to sell any of my wares. The laces remained 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 illusionist's tricks we gradually got to know one another. When he bought fried dumplings he'd sometimes give me a few, and when my mum brought back buttered pastries from grandma's hometown in Dajia, I'd share them with him. When he was eating, the illusionist'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 be fine. Don't try to sell anything—whatever you do, don't try to sell anything. Oh, and don't touch the little man.'

I was more than happy to oblige, and it was a simple job. Sitting in the illusionist's chair, it was as if I was the illusionist. Sitting there, at last I had a chance to get close to the little man. Then I clapped my hands like the illusionist, and sung a strange, muttering song, and chanted an incomprehensible incantation. The little paper man rose to his feet shakily, as if he had heard his summons, and began to dance around the chalk circle.

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

The matchbox was just the right size to serve as the little man's chair, as though it was specially meant to serve that purpose. When the illusionist wasn't making him dance, the little black paper 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 man think about? Were there certain anxieties that only a little black paper man could have? Was there, somewhere out there, a school where only little paper people could go to study? What lessons would they teach a school like that? Would the little black paper people also have to memorise their nine

times table? Did the school for little black paper people have music class (and if not, how was it that he could dance)? Being made from such flimsy paper, how could the little man possibly play dodgeball? I secretly worried on the little man's behalf, just the same way as my ma worried about me.

Regardless of whether I was minding the illusionist's stall or sitting at my own stall, I always watched the little black paper man, lost in thoughts like these.

Once the illusionist 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 paper 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 there was a chill in the air, there weren't many passersby on the Skywalk. I ended up dozing off. I guess I could only have been asleep for a very short time before I was woken up by drops of water falling onto me. I looked up; rain was most definitely falling from an overcast sky. I wasn't bothered about my insoles, but I had to get the illusionist's big umbrella open, and stick it into the umbrella stand next to his stall. The umbrella was so big I couldn't pull it open no matter what I did—my arms were too short. Just like that, it was bucketing down, and soon a stream of water had taken shape on the Skywalk, flowing towards the drains. It just so happened that on that day the little black paper 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, he 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 the paper was stuck to the cement of the Skywalk, and so when I tugged on the little man's hand, it ripped right off. I started crying, tears streaming, wailing, 'The little man's hand is broken, the little man is dead, his hand's broken!'

Auntie Ah Fen, who sold children's clothes on the next stall along (although I called her auntie, she was probably only just a kid in junior middle school), had first hurried to sort out the umbrella over her own stall, and now raced over to help me pull open mine, before staring at the little black man on the ground. I kept on crying, wailing so hard that I nearly got a cramp. Only then did I see the illusionist return. With his two eyes facing in different directions, he began to gather up his goods.

'It's raining, and you haven't covered your own things,' he said. 'If the insoles are all soaked you'll catch hell from your mother.' I didn't know if he was angry or not. I stuttered, unable to get a sentence out intact. The little black paper man was dead, and his death was my fault. A hole had been poked through my heart, as though it, too, was made out of paper.

When my mum ushered me out to set up the stall the next day, I felt terrible. I didn't want to be anywhere near the illusionist—but at the same time, I wanted to find out for sure how the little black paper man was doing. Maybe it was just his arm that was broken, and he wasn't dead. Couldn't a little black paper man still dance with a broken arm? Couldn't he still go to the little black paper people school?

When I arrived, the illusionist didn't call out his usual greeting—'Kiddo, have you eaten your fill today?'—even though he had seen me. He just sat silently in his chair. I felt like a hopeless good-for-nothing. The cars beneath the Skywalk passed to and fro; the dust above the Skywalk drifted down onto me; and there wasn't a single passerby who wasn't happier than me.

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

The illusionist placed this new little black paper man on the ground, drew a fresh yellow chalk circle, hummed his tune and called out. The new little black paper man was dancing, just the same as the last one had danced before. He did it with a little more dash, it seemed: he could twirl, now, too! Delighted, I yelled, 'He's not dead—he's not dead!' But once the words left my mouth I felt they weren't quite true. Could it be that this little man was not the same one whose hand I had broken off? Could this be an entirely new little black paper man?

The illusionist looked at me through his right eye, a small 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 paper 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 illusionist 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 illusionist thought for a while, before replying in a hoarse voice. 'Because sometimes the things you remember your whole life are not the things that your eyes have seen.'

Honestly, I didn't understand what the illusionist meant at all. But this was the first time he'd spoken to me like this—as if he were talking to me as a grown-up, like he had seen something in me that he approved of.

When I got home and told my brother about the little black paper man, and what the illusionist had said to me, he was angry. I didn't understand why. He said he was going to tell Ma, and she wouldn't let me go sell insoles on the Skywalk any more, because the illusionist was going to trick me into running away with him.

That night I dreamt of the little black paper man. He took me to a forest, although back then, the closest thing to a forest that I had seen was the New Park. We sang songs together, and played hide-and-seek. Deep within the forest I saw a bright patch, and the little black paper man said I couldn't go there. I asked why, and he said it was too dark. But it was actually 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 illusionist, and my brother didn't tell our mother about what had happened with the little black paper man. One by one, the days passed by. As I got to know the illusionist better, I pleaded with him in private to tell me the secret of the little black paper man. Only when I mentioned this to him did he ever turn serious.

'Kiddo, I'm telling you—all my magic is fake. Only the little black paper 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 illusionist wasn't telling me the truth. I could tell he was hiding something by looking in his eyes—just like my ma said she could tell when I was lying by looking into mine.

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

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

I talked this over with the illusionist. '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 paper man.' I don't know when I turned into such a smooth-talker—maybe the business savvy my mother talked about could run in the blood after all.

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

One evening as I was packing up the stall, the illusionist put away the little black paper man and his magic tricks, and beckoned me towards him. I followed him without the slightest hesitation, my heart pounding. He kept going straight ahead, right across the Skywalk 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 illusionist opened the lock, and gestured for me to head 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 much smaller back then. From the Skywalk you could see the holiday fireworks over Tamsui river, and when the weather was good you could even see the hills of Yangmingshan. Taipei in those days 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. I stood on the roof with the illusionist, the glimmering lanterns of Ximending on one side, the Presidential Office Building lit up on the other. The illusionist pointed off to the side, to a corner of the roof underneath a neon sign.

'This is where I live,' he said. 'But the day will come when I will leave this place.' The corner was covered by a rain shield for the neon sign's generator. Along with a jumble of plastic bags and a dishevelled 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 illusionist too.'

'Being an illusionist wouldn't suit you. Because illusionists have many secrets, and people with many secrets do not lead happy lives.'

'Why?'

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

'Right!' I nodded my head as hard as I could. Was the illusionist really prepared to teach me? My heart thudded so hard it felt like it was trying to escape.

'It can't be learned. The little black paper 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 paper 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 it. 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 perform real magic, like the little black paper man—it was because I could take something out of my imagination, out of my head, and turn it into something everyone can see. All I have done is influence the world that you can all see. It's just the same as when someone makes a movie.'

I angled my head to one side. Next to us, the enormous neon sign for HeySong Sarsaparilla hummed. I didn't understand what the illusionist was saying; his eyes gleamed blue in the blue neon light, green in the green neon light. I thought more 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 paper 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.'

The illusionist extended his right hand, as if 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 on his palm. The illusionist slowly bent his index finger, middle finger, and thumb, and inserted them into his left eye. My own eyeballs ached at the sight. The illusionist's eye socket seemed to be very soft—his fingers quickly extended inside—and with a light twist, the illusionist plucked out his left eye, and placed it on the palm of his right hand. The eyeball he'd dug out didn't bleed, and it didn't tear. It was like a perfect, newborn, opalescent star.