

Magic

You say you don't believe in magic. That's okay. Lots of people don't believe in magic and they live their lives just fine. I just want to assure you that there is such a thing as magic. Do you know how I know? I can do it.

No, really! Since about age five or so I have never once — not ever — been bitten by a mosquito or been stung by a bee or wasp or caught poison ivy or stepped on a nail or been cut or scraped by something sharp I happened to brush past. It was about then that I learned to coat myself — that's how I describe it — with a layer of... something... I don't know. In science-fiction stories, they might call it a force field. Maybe that's what it is. I just think of it as a coating. Nothing can get to my skin closer than the thickness of a pencil lead. What's that? Half a millimeter?

And that's not all. A couple of years back I learned to hone my reflexes. That might be a bad way to describe it. I know what you're about to do a half-second before you do. When you throw a punch, I already know it's coming and (usually) can get out of its way. Even if it lands, if I've got my coating on, I barely feel it.

Okay, so I can't wave a magic wand and cast a spell to turn lead into gold, but you may have seen me on some TV game shows. I was on two of them a few years apart and raked in \$135,000 on one of them and \$81,000 on the other because I have this ever-so-slim advantage over most — not all — of the other players.

The latest 'trick' I've been perfecting is something I call 'dusting'. It takes a heap of concentration, but what I'm targeting will suddenly turn to dust. It is the wildest effect! A flower suddenly — like a light switching off — goes from a pretty pink construction to a cloud of particles falling to the ground — POOF! It comes in pretty handy every now and then, too. Once I was taking an old piece of lawn equipment apart, and everything was rusted in place. It occurred to me that I really didn't need to save all those nuts and bolts, so one by one I just dusted them. There's no real sound when it happens. It just turns to dust. My brother looked at all the disassembled parts later and asked "where are all the bolts?" I told him none of them survived the disassembly process and he seemed to be okay with that. All that stuff would normally be replaced with new ones anyway, so it was no big deal.

I got mugged a month ago. When two guys about my age confronted me, I was already coated. I coat myself whenever I go out and even sometimes when I'm at home. So, here are two guys, both with knives that look like they could do some damage. I wasn't worried for me — I've got a protective coating and reflexes better than theirs — but I felt that

running away was cowardly, and their next victim might not have that option, so I acted.

"Fuck off," I replied to their demand for my wallet. The one nearest jabbed at me with his knife. I grabbed his hand and twisted it back into his wrist. This caused him to drop the knife and go down on one knee. The other one stabbed me in the ribs. I think we were both surprised that he didn't break the skin, but when he decided to keep stabbing, I dusted his knife hand. He screamed and ran off. I let the other one go and he soon followed his partner. I collected the two knives just to keep them from falling into the wrong hands.

I looked for something about it on the evening news for the next few nights, but didn't see anything. It's possible — probable, in fact — that the news outlets blew it off as 'not believable'.

I can coat other people, too, if they're close, and I even tried coating our house one Halloween during a period marked by 'eggings' where trick-or-treaters would throw eggs at houses as a prank. A single egg splashed against the coating and slid down to the ground like the house had a non-stick coating — which, in fact, it did.

The bad thing about that coating is that I can't eat or pee or poop through it, although I can breathe through it. I just thought of that and I can't explain it, but I can put that coating on and take it off so quickly that it almost doesn't make a difference. Off, take a bite, on, swallow... like that fast.

My ability to coat other things came in very handy on one occasion. A bunch of us were riding around in Leo's new used car and we found ourselves in the middle of a street riot. Gangs of rioters were throwing bricks and rocks at cars driving by on the street. As I watched, a brick came soaring through the air headed straight for Leo's windshield. I probably should have let it hit, but it was by then nearly a reflex: I wrapped the car a second before the brick smashed into the glass — and bounced off. Leo sped away from the action and I unwrapped his car as soon as we were clear.

Later, when I finally got my own car, I made it a permanent practice to put that protective coating on whenever I took it on the road. I've been involved in one accident — not my fault — in which the other car got wrinkled and mine didn't get a scratch. The trooper was highly perplexed that my car didn't have damage comparable to that on the other car and I declined to speculate on how that might have happened. It helps with the insurance, too, because I can opt for a very high deductible and not have to worry about paying for damage. It also makes my car essentially theft-proof.

I typically leave that coating on around the clock. I almost never have to take the car to the car wash. Dirt and rain spots never get near the finish — and don't even bother trying to 'key' it if you get ticked at me.

I'm cultivating a deliberate sense of *noblesse oblige*, largely because I'm a little afraid of what I might become if I don't. Can you imagine a tyrant with such power?

I first used my talents to browbeat someone, and I excuse myself for it because that someone was being their own kind of tyrant. It was a code enforcement officer from the town who objected to some landscaping that my folks did. My Mom got this itch to do drought-tolerant landscaping — I think they sometimes call it 'xeriscaping' — and didn't realize there was a town ordinance requiring grass lawns until the proper department issued a variance. When she pointed out to the code officer that lots of houses had shrubs and bushes around them, likely all without the required variances, he got testy and ordered my folks to remove all those expensive plantings until we had applied for and received a variance allowing their installation. 'Taking them out' followed by 'storing them for several months' followed by 'putting them back in' would probably have killed the plants, and it was a couple thousand dollars worth of plants, and they were getting fined each day the plants stayed in the ground.

I didn't tell anyone what I was going to do. I stopped by Town Hall the next day and asked for the code officer by name and got an appointment to see him personally, then returned that same afternoon to meet in his office.

"I'm unofficially representing the Durkin family," I opened the conversation. He frowned. "I want to make the point that treating townspeople imperiously isn't a good public policy. When coupled with financial punishment such as a daily fine, it discourages others from improving their properties. It is a policy that, were it turned against the town, would be considered 'terrorism'."

"My job is to enforce the building codes, period," the code guy explained. "I'm charged with making sure everybody follows the same rules."

"I was under the impression that my family was and is prepared to follow those rules now that they've been made aware of them. They're going to apply for a variance, and the odds of it being approved is..." I offered him a chance to speculate on our chances for success.

"Near 100%, I would guess," he replied.

"Okay," I continued, "they'll apply for a variance, it will likely be granted, and all those plants will suddenly become legal. Why is it necessary to order the plants dug up, and impose a fine until that happens?"

"The fine is to make sure it does happen," he snapped back.

"Why does that matter if it's a near certainty they'll be permitted in the end?"

"Look, we can't just allow everybody to do their own thing," he explained patiently. "Those rules are in place to ensure uniformity throughout the town."

I must have paused a long time pondering the immutability of the bureaucratic mind because he interrupted my reverie: "Are we done here?"

While I was thinking, I had also been inventorying his desk. "Are you allowed to have all this stuff cluttering up a desk the taxpayers of this town paid for?" I challenged him.

"Huh?"

"Look at all this clutter," I chided him, picking up a paperweight from some local lumberyard. "Is this advertising for your favorite business? I don't think we should just allow everybody at Town Hall to give favored businesses free advertising, do you?"

"What in Hell are you talking about?"

I held the paperweight in front of him. "This has to go," I told him, and then the paperweight turned to dust. "That ruler, too," I indicated a long ruler with the logo of another local business. It turned to dust a fraction of a second after his eyes came to rest on it.

"You should hope I don't decide you have to go," I told him as I looked straight into his eyes. "That would be... unfortunate, wouldn't it?"

"What...?" he began.

I rose to leave. "You need to learn to treat the townspeople as your employer," I explained, "so they aren't forced to make unhappy changes at Town Hall. Tell me: what sort of changes do you think you could make that would show those townspeople you enjoy working for them?"

He was clearly still trying to process the loss of a paperweight and a ruler, but he had heard my question.

"Maybe... go easy on punitive fines?"

"I think you're on the right track," I congratulated him. "Keep thinking along those lines and I predict a successful career for you." I turned and left.

When I got home, my Dad informed me that we didn't have to dig up all the plants because the code officer had called to let him know he had had a change of heart about the fine.

They say the ends justify the means, but I have felt for a long time that it's the means that make the ends worthwhile. I shouldn't have done that, not only because it was morally suspect, but more because it exposed my abilities in a way that could come back at me later.

It didn't occur to me until much later that my talents were as easily turned to evil as to good, and that there were probably very many instances where it would be hard to tell which of those were in play. Sure, if I were

witnessing an armed robbery, it would be easy to dust all the ammunition in a robber's gun. It might not stop the robbery, but it would ensure the victim didn't lose anything but money, and no one would be the wiser. That's a nutty example, I know; almost no one ever witnesses *somebody else's* armed robbery. I did, however, once watch a cop bash a suspect with his night stick and it looked to me like it was done for no real reason except the cop was ticked off. I probably *should have* dusted that night stick then and there, but it didn't occur to me until later that I could have prevented abuse of a prisoner. Sometimes these situations happen so fast they're over and done with before anyone realizes what's happening.

It was because of that and a few other similar incidents that I decided to go into journalism.

Do you remember during the last election circus when President Charles wanted to avoid confrontations with his detractors? Hired security details set up "free speech zones" ringed with cyclone fencing where all the protesters could be isolated and not make a big fuss where the regular news crews might see them. Yeah, that was me. I dusted just one zigzag strand of fencing and the whole thing just unzipped. The big news services didn't have any choice after that but to report what was happening.

Because I was making a public pain-in-the-ass of myself, I suppose I drew unwanted attention. I got pulled over by a state trooper one night for what was probably a made-up offense or a manufactured one. I got ordered out of the car along with the girl I was with, the trooper searched the car because he said he smelled something he shouldn't have, found it, and then we were both arrested.

I knew I didn't have anything illegal with me. "Did you have anything in that car that you shouldn't have?" I asked my date. She swore up and down that she didn't smoke anything, and having kissed her more than once, I found that believable. I was being set up, and she was collateral damage. I hired an attorney to represent us both. During my attorney's preliminary interviews, I asked him to arrange a one-on-one, just me and the District Attorney.

I was ushered into the DA's office and was surprised to find a uniformed police officer present.

"I thought this was going to be one-on-one," I started.

"You're an indicted defendant," he told me. "If you think I'm going to be alone in this room with you, you're not thinking straight."

"I have confidential matters to discuss, and his presence will make that problematic."

"Can't be helped," the DA replied.

"Are we being recorded?" I asked.

"No. Your attorney insisted this was to be off the record."

This wasn't how I imagined it was going to play out. "Okay, off the record, I am being set up by persons unknown and I'm asking for your help to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I prosecute based on the evidence presented. If there's evidence you committed a crime, I'm going to prosecute it. That's how this all works."

"I'm OK with that," I told him. "What I'm not OK with is when false evidence is presented. The trooper who pulled us over planted evidence in my car and that's a crime in itself..."

"You can prove that?"

"No, but you can. You have access to that trooper's arrest records and can perhaps discern a pattern of illegal activity..."

"Not my job," the DA cut me off in mid-sentence.

"'Justice' is not your job?"

"Technically, yes, but my job is mainly focused on 'putting law-breakers in jail'."

"So you're not interested in whether the evidence against me is bogus?"

"If it is, you should probably be able to impeach it in front of a jury."

"I kind of thought that was your job," I remarked. The DA looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, as you and the system attempt to railroad innocent victims into prison, I think you should expect significant push-back."

"Is that a threat?" he asked.

"No," I told him, "it's a prophecy." As we were shaking hands, I dusted the pinkie finger of his left hand. He didn't notice right away, but I'm sure he was aware of it by the next day.

With no prior record to speak of, I made bail easily, even though my newspaper didn't want to get involved in a matter involving illegal drugs. I had given my attorney enough information about my suspicions that his questioning during depositions was incisive. The experts the State would call for the prosecution would — none of them — be able to testify truthfully that the chain of custody of any of the subsidiary evidence — primarily urine samples — taken from me and my date that night was unbroken. That evidence would be challenged and very likely thrown out. DNA analysis of the marijuana said to have been found in my car also revealed that it matched exactly to a large haul made by the State Police within the past year. The coincidence of that would call into question the trooper's testimony and support my contention that it had been planted.

In any case, the DA seemed disinclined to press this case too hard, and before it came to trial, the State moved to drop the charges. This wasn't entirely unexpected given the mystery of the missing pinkie.

They didn't, however, back off from the civil asset forfeiture charge against my car. They still held that in an impound lot and had plans to auction it off as 'proceeds of a crime'. Having won my case by default, I was even so going to have to replace my car.

As I walked out of the courthouse a free man, I paused long enough to dust the valve stems on all the tires of all the police cars in the parking lot. Thirty-two tires and eight spares suddenly went flat with forty rapid-fire 'pop's.

"When you get a chance, tell the DA that push-back can be very painful for slow learners," I instructed my lawyer.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"The DA will understand," I told him.

They sold my car at auction. I made sure I was there, and I made sure the car had four flat tires when people were bidding on it. In fact, I made sure that all the cars sold that day had four flat tires. I bid on the car, but was outbid by someone with more disposable income than I could muster. By the time each car was being hauled up onto the beds of tow trucks, none of them had tires at all, and the oil pan plugs had mysteriously disappeared, allowing the engine oil to leak out onto the auction lot.

I heard later that several of those auctioned cars had generated lawsuits against the county, but that since they were sold 'as-is', all the lawsuits had been dismissed.

Over the next several months, city vehicles, county vehicles, and police cars from several jurisdictions had reported sporadic problems with their engine oil and inability to lock the doors and trunks, along with rampant low tire pressure problems.

Periodically, I would call the DA's office to complain about being cheated out of my car, but I think none of those complaints ever made it as far as the DA's office itself. It was fully eight months of rapid turnover of city and county vehicle mechanics due to their inability to keep their fleets on the road before someone — probably at the request of the DA — decided to return one of my many calls.

I explained at some length the nature of my complaint — that even though the county had dropped all charges against me, personally, and my date that night, my car had still been seized as being involved in a crime, and had subsequently been auctioned off with the county pocketing the proceeds.

"Now, Mr. Durkin, you do realize, don't you, that what happened is strictly in accordance with state and federal law?"

"I understand that it was legal," I told her, "but 'legal' is not equivalent to 'right'. An act that is wrong cannot be made right by action of the legislature. It is wrong and it remains wrong no matter what the law says about it."

"That may be true, Mr. Durkin, but this office is guided by the law, not by considerations of right and wrong."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I told her. "I just want you to understand that while two wrongs don't make something right, it can provide a great deal of satisfaction to one party or the other."

"Are you referring to the county's problems with its automobile and truck fleets, Mr. Durkin?"

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're referring to," I told her, "but I do know that doing the right thing always leads to positive outcomes. I hope the proper officials within the county learn that lesson soon. You would do the citizenry a very great service if you could successfully transmit that message."

It was no more than two weeks later that I received another call from someone at the county government offices.

"Mr. Durkin, the county recognizes that it has treated you unfairly, and we have resolved to rectify that. I hope that you will allow us to replace your car that was inadvertently sold at auction."

"Mr. Simms, my car was not 'inadvertently' sold by the county. My car was sold under the provisions of a long-standing county policy, and I am not the only person treated unfairly as a result of that policy. If the county is truly interested in rectifying their past sins, the county likely has a long list of persons similarly treated unfairly. While I'm happy that the county recognizes that it has behaved badly in the past towards me, there are many people who need to be made whole again, not just me. Is this apology strictly for me, or are you making similar apologies to others?"

"Well..." Simms hesitated, "I believe you are the only person we are apologizing to."

"I accept your apology and your offer of restitution, but only if it extends to all the others who have been affected."

"I..." Simms stammered.

"It would be morally wrong for you to treat me preferentially, whatever your reason for doing so, and it would be morally wrong for me to allow you to treat me that way. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You're saying we have to replace all the cars..."

"All the property," I interjected.

"All the property we have seized... I'm not sure my superiors would be willing..."

"Then you have to convince them, Mr. Simms, that 'doing the right thing' is more than fixing a single problem. If all they want is to fix a single problem, Mr. Simms, they aren't serious about curing the problem of them behaving badly. Please call me back when you have good news." I hung up on him.

It wasn't more than four days after that that I answered a knock on the door. It was a low-level county employee offering me a set of keys to a new GMC parked at the curb in front of my house.

"What's this?" I asked him.

"I don't know. I was told to deliver this vehicle and hand you these keys."

"By whom?" I asked.

"By my boss."

"...Whose name is?"

"Gene Rooker."

I got Rooker's phone number from the deliveryman and called him.

"What can you tell me about this car?" I asked him.

"It's the replacement for yours. That's all I know."

"I spoke a little while back with a Mr. Simms," I prompted.

"Yeah, Simms isn't with us anymore."

"Right," I told him, "I'm sending this car back. Have Simms' boss call me direct. I'm certain they have my number."

"Well," he started hesitatingly, "I was Simms' boss."

"Tell me, then, why isn't Simms 'with us' anymore?"

"It's a personnel issue," Rooker replied. "I can't discuss it."

"Listen, you," I barked into the phone, "if you expect to deal with me, you'd fucking well better deal with me straight. Answer my question."

"The county manager didn't like his message."

"Didn't like my message, you mean. Okay, here's the deal: you assholes contacted me and I told Simms the conditions under which you could make things right. If you're not willing to meet those conditions, go away and never contact me again. You're not serious about solving your problems and I'm not interested, either.

"P.s.: you should hire Simms back. It's bad policy to shoot the piano player." I hung up. I handed the keys back to the delivery driver and he left with the car.

It was a gigantic hit to the county budget, but it was small potatoes compared to what the county was spending keeping its trucks and police cars rolling. The local birdcage liner had a field day roasting the county executive over all the money he was spending to correct past sins, many of them not even attributable to his own administration. The worst instance was someone who had since moved out of state. His family estate had been seized under similar circumstances, and since the county couldn't replace the property without blatantly unconstitutional action, they just wrote him a check for \$7.3 million. Neither the DA nor the county executive knew it at the time, but that one check doomed both their re-election campaigns.

You're welcome.

The town my family lives in is small enough that, if you grew up there, you probably know a substantial portion of the populace. It is, because of that, one of the safest places in the country, if not the world. Our crime rate is remarkable only for its absence. My next door neighbor is more likely to be struck by lightning, attacked by a shark, or to hit the state lottery than to be the victim of a crime.

There's a nearby larger city for which this is definitely not true.

My work as, first, a newspaper reporter, then as a TV community advocate, made me intimately familiar with which parts of our local metropolis were the hotbeds of criminal activity. It didn't occur to me until much later that I was mirroring a series of cult movies in the 70s, 80s, and 90s about a vigilante who kills street thugs, although the impetus there was that the vigilante had lost family to street crime. In my case, it just — happened.

My ability to cloak myself with a protective film and my ability to dispatch evildoers by dusting them meant that I had little to fear from walking alone through the less-safe parts of our big city neighbor. The combination called to me like a siren. Did I have the right to walk away from this? Did I not have a responsibility to help my community?

You have no idea how long I grappled with those questions or how passionately I wrestled with the moral issues behind it. 'Vengeance is mine' sayeth the Lord, but 'self defense is the first law of nature'. On behalf of all those for whom self defense was only wishful thinking, I took my stand.

My station had sent me on an assignment to New York City to cover a sci-fi convention, and they put me up at a hotel on W. 59th Street, Central Park South. My hotel's front door was across the street from Central Park and less than a hundred yards from a pedestrian entrance. At this point, I hadn't given serious consideration to 'embarking on a mission'. I just couldn't resist the lure of walking through one of America's iconic parks. When shooting for our 'special' wrapped around 4pm, I dumped my gear in my room and headed across the street to enjoy a walk.

If you haven't experienced Central Park, you just won't understand. It's twice the size of Monaco, almost one-and-a-half square miles, so there's a lot of park here. Make walking paths though that much land, and you wind up with miles... no, leagues of walking paths. It would take you days to traverse all the miles of paths in the park. As a result, it's almost impossible to police all those paths, and Central Park has gotten a bad reputation as a mugger's paradise. After dark, it becomes unusually dangerous for anyone except those in a group.

That first night, it hadn't even occurred to me that I would be putting myself in danger. My special talents gave me a *bravado* native New Yorkers would have scoffed at. I probably hadn't gone three hundred yards into the park when I realized I was being stalked. Any other person would have panicked. I just thought: *they don't know what's in store for them.*

I kept walking but stayed cognizant of the pack that was trailing me. At one point, the path tunneled under a roadway above and it was there that my stalkers had planned to start their attack. One group was sent on ahead, crossing the roadway above and doubling back so that I could be trapped in the tunnel by one group ahead of me and another behind me.

I didn't understand that when I first entered the underpass, but it became apparent very quickly thereafter. By about the time I was half-way or a little further into the tunnel, the group behind had blocked off my retreat. About the same time, the group ahead appeared at the far end of the underpass. I kept walking.

"Well, look at what we have here," a voice from behind boomed, his voice echoing against the walls. I kept walking, getting closer to the group ahead. I, per my usual practice, was already wrapped, so I wasn't concerned for my own safety. Right about then, I wrapped everybody in sight, the group ahead and the group behind. They, of course, noticed nothing.

"You kids aren't contemplating anything illegal, I hope," I called to them.

They laughed. "Not unless you call 'taking your wallet' 'illegal'," one of them answered.

"Yes," I told him, "I would call taking my wallet illegal. I'm afraid all of you are going to be very disappointed tonight."

"What? You don't have a wallet?" their leader challenged.

"I have a wallet," I told him. "You won't be taking it."

"We'll see," he barked, and the whole group, maybe eight of them, closed on me. One tried unsuccessfully to stab me. The rest of them seemed befuddled that they couldn't get a decent grip on my arms or legs. After a few minutes of fumbling they drew back from their attack. "What the fuck..." their leader mumbled.

I pulled free and turned on them. "Now, you all have to be punished for your bad behavior," I explained. "The Golden Rule tells us that how you treat others is the way you want others to treat you, so now I'm going to relieve you all of your wallets. Everybody get in line over there against the wall."

A few moved toward the wall, but most of them just stared at me.

"Fuck you!" one of them shouted at me. I dusted him, just his body, leaving his clothes as-is. It was as if he disappeared and his clothes just collapsed to the ground in a heap. All the others lined up against the wall.

I unwrapped that pile of clothes and fetched the wallet out of the pocket of the jeans. "Robert Dugan," I read the ID from the wallet, then retrieved twelve dollars from its pockets along with a small-caliber pistol. "Next!" I motioned to the first in line to move forward and dropped his wrapping as he approached. "Money and weapons," I ordered. He handed

over seven dollars and a knife. "Take a walk," I ordered, and he departed in a great hurry.

The next claimed only to have pocket change which I declined. From the next several thugs, I collected a grand total of forty-seven dollars, three more knives, and a loaded .45 caliber Glock, sending each of them on their way as they paid their ransom.

As I exited the park on my way back to the hotel, I passed a homeless man huddled against the park's stonework. I handed him the sixty-six dollars I had collected. "None of this for alcohol," I told him as I handed him the wad. "Get yourself some food, and maybe spread it around."

Inside the hotel, I buttonholed the concierge. "I ran into some thugs during a walk this evening," I explained, "and I relieved them of their weaponry. Do you have any suggestions about what I should do with two pistols I took from them?"

The concierge had a startled look on his face. "You're not hurt?" I assured him I was fine, but that I didn't want the New York City police arresting me. "Oh, nothing to worry about," he assured me as he dialed the local precinct.

Within a half hour, there was a knock at my door. Two uniformed officers entered, I handed them the guns, and they arrested me. Apparently it's illegal to have guns in your possession in New York City regardless of how you came by them. My attempt to explain how I acquired them they waved off as irrelevant. "Tell it to the judge."

As we walked by the concierge's desk, me in handcuffs, I told the concierge: "Nothing to worry about, huh?"

Sitting in the back seat of the police car on our way to the lock-up, I dusted the handcuffs to free my hands. I thought about dusting the whole police car, briefly, before it occurred to me to dust the two guns. Silently, they both turned to powder within the plastic bags that held them.

At the police station, they started to book me when they discovered their evidence had disappeared along with somebody's handcuffs. "What do you know about the two guns these officers said you had?" the desk sergeant demanded.

"Guns? What guns? I have no idea what they're talking about."

In the end, the sergeant declined to book me for a crime his DA couldn't argue in court.

"How about a lift back to my hotel?" I asked.

"Call a cab," the sergeant snarled.

I dusted the valve stems on three NYPD police cars parked outside the station as I left.

As I mentioned earlier, my town is a suburb of a larger city with a similarly-sized crime problem, albeit concentrated in particular sections of

the city. From time to time, especially when other matters took me there, I patrolled — I probably shouldn't use that word — those seedier sections of the city alone at night. It didn't happen very often, but I did have several episodes that very closely paralleled my experience in Central Park. Only on the rarest of occasions did some low-life disappear off the face of the Earth. I pride myself that street crime took a small but not insignificant dive in time with my efforts.

The most uncomfortable incident happened while I was out with my then-current girlfriend. A man was running toward us in apparent panic and he was being chased by two others shouting 'Stop, thief!' or something similar. I could have just stepped aside and let events unfold naturally, but something deep inside urged me to act. I wrapped the running thief and when I did, I imagined a much thicker 'bubble' than I usually used for myself or others close by. Suddenly, the runner was lifted two inches off the ground and his feet were no longer giving him any propulsion. They weren't much use to slow him down, either. He seemed to bounce off nearby people and objects, losing speed with each collision, until his two pursuers finally caught up. At that point, the trio were half a football field away. I unwrapped the thief, his feet dropped to the ground, and the chasers grabbed him by his arms.

"Did you just see that?" my girlfriend asked in amazement.

"Yeah, they caught him."

"No," she said. "He was flying through the air."

"Not very fast if they were able to catch him."

"Are you saying you didn't see that guy's feet inches off the ground?"

I looked at her. "Are you alright?"

"I was not seeing things!"

I shrugged. "Optical illusion," I told her. She had her lips so tightly clenched together that her lips were white. "Okay, I admit it. I did it to him. Is that better?"

"You're impossible," she huffed. "I'm going over there to ask if they need a witness. You should do your 'reporter' thing and get some pictures for the 11-o'clock news." We both headed for the heart of the action and got there about the same time as two police cars.

Four police tumbled out of their vehicles and urged the crowd to back away. One of them started gathering facts from participants and bystanders. I flashed my press credentials and they let me stay relatively close so I could hear and see what was happening.

The probable thief was street-wise enough to say nothing, not even bothering to deny anything he was accused of. The chasers gave mutually conflicting and highly implausible accounts of the chase and capture. I snapped a few pictures with the camera I always carried and took notes of overheard dialog. None of it would qualify for the 11-o'clock news, but the

news director took notice that I was on-scene and turned in a first-person account. It wouldn't get me a raise, but it might keep me from being laid-off someday. Might.

Thinking that it couldn't hurt, I got my Private Investigator's certification and quietly began to spread the word that I was available for hire to provide security services. That turned out to be a wise move, because when the TV station I worked for needed to cut staff, they cut the least experienced staff with the least seniority. So long and thanks for all the fish.

Soon afterward, I got a short contract babysitting some corporate executive's kids. It wasn't a lush contract, but it allowed me to pay the rent on the office and stay fed. Because it was just me running the operation, I wound up working around the clock and bunking with the kids at their parents' house, which was pretty nice.

At first, I thought the guy's fears were overblown, but my fears turned out to be very much underblown. On the third day, I was escorting them home from school when our car was cut off by two others on a side street. Yes, our car was wrapped at the time, sealed the instant the doors closed with the kids inside. Four burly thugs surrounded us with guns aimed at the car's windows. Some of the guns looked like they would have needed ATF paperwork.

"Everybody out!" their leader screamed at us.

"Drive!" I yelled at our driver. "Crash through!" He froze. I dusted all four thugs, drew my own weapon, and exited the car. Both of the other cars' drivers seemed unaware that their operation had just fallen apart. I pointed my 1911A1 at one driver and motioned him out — which he did. I wrapped him immediately. I tapped the passenger window of the other car and did the same to the second driver.

I relieved them both of their sidearms, phones, and wallets, putting the wallets and phones in my pockets, then collected the phones, guns, and wallets from four dusty piles of clothing, stowing them in the trunk of the limo.

I waved a wallet at them. "I know who you are, and I know how to find you, so do yourselves a favor and answer my questions so you don't wind up like these mokes." I indicated the four suits minus bodies. "Are these your guns or did somebody supply them? Or did you steal them?"

"They're ours," one of them volunteered. "Not stolen."

"Who's paying you?" They hesitated. "You could be a pile of dust like your buddies," I warned, "and it's a one-way trip."

"Manny Vasoulides," one blurted. I nodded.

"Unlock your phone," I ordered one. "Find Manny in your phone's addressbook." He did so and handed the phone to me. I copied Manny's contact information, address and telephone number, into my notebook.

"Tell Manny he's in 'way over his head on this one. He needs to find a safer way of doing business. Buy new phones," I ordered them. "Now, get lost, and it would be a very good thing if you mentioned what happened today to nobody, right?"

They both nodded. I unwrapped them and their cars, waved them toward their cars, and they scooted. I got back inside our limo and put our wrapper back on. "Let's go," I ordered the driver who had finally unfrozen.

"Kids," I whispered to the children, "I would like it if you just told everybody that you slept the whole trip home from school." Both of them were wide-eyed over what they had just seen, and it may have occurred to them that no one would believe them anyway. They wouldn't be able, of course, to say nothing, but what tales they did tell were somewhat disjointed because they didn't understand what had happened before their eyes, and there were enough discrepancies between the two that their stories were heavily discounted.

Their Dad was very appreciative of my skills at keeping his children safe, and offered a fat bonus if I would stay on. Yes, I accepted. Do I look stupid?

I carefully documented the names of the four thugs I dusted and the two drivers I allowed to live, just in case. As I suspected, some of the hardware I collected was very illegal without ATF paper and the proper tax stamps, and I stowed those carefully away in a wrapped gun safe. The ordinary hardware I sold in private sales to trusted friends on condition they never mentioned my name in connection with them. A buddy wiped the six phones I had and I sold them on eBay for pocket change.

It was a very nice contract after that. There were no further attempts on the kids, and it was just a matter of escorting them here and there and collecting my paycheck.

The only uncomfortable spot was a visit from two detectives following up on mysterious disappearances. The missing persons were traced by bank records back toward Manny, and interviews with others similarly connected had, in turn, led to my employer, but everything they had was hear-say and it was easy to just shrug my shoulders and deny everything.

I could have, now that I think about it, admitted to everything, and they would have let me skate because (a) I had done a public service for a prominent citizen who held many IOUs from other prominent citizens, and (b) where could they find a jury that would believe any of this?

But I did feel very unhappy with my increasing tendency to paper over the truth.

Susan

I began to feel less unhappy and uncomfortable on the day I discovered there existed another person like me.

Susan was, by profession, a librarian. She worked for a large corporation whose name you would recognize in a heartbeat, and managed their private library of proprietary documents, many of which were considered too valuable to be made available digitally. Perhaps 'librarian' is the wrong word, except that her degree was in Library Science. 'Custodian' may be closer to her actual function. Nobody got access to those documents without her permission. Although I asked her once, she declined to share with me the nature of any of them.

She was pretty but not beautiful with straight black hair that ended in a well-coiffed line just below her shoulders. What little makeup she wore was meant merely to emphasize rather than attract. A string of pearls perfectly accessorized her little black dress. The combination made her far more attractive than she probably intended.

I met her at a party hosted by a mutual friend. As was my custom, I attended 'wrapped'. It kept me from spending money unnecessarily on dry cleaning clothes accidentally spilled upon by semi-inebriated party-goers. As I was engaging her in conversation away from the main action, someone nearby tripped, and a drink came flying through the air toward us. In the blink of an eye, I coated her just as the plastic tumbler tagged her... and the fluid slipped directly to the rug beneath us leaving her dress untouched and dry.

She looked at me, then smiled. "You did that, didn't you?" she asked accusingly.

"Huh?" I responded.

"You cloaked me," she explained. I gave her my 'stupid' look. "I'm the only person I know who can do that, and I didn't do it," she continued.

I considered how stupid it would seem if I continued this conversation and I was actually misunderstanding her. It seemed worth the risk. "What else can you do?" I asked.

Her hand fell to her side and the empty plastic tumbler leaped into it from the floor.

I nodded in silent understanding. "Impressive," I whispered. "I'm finding you much more interesting than this party. Why don't we move to someplace quieter so we can let this conversation range far and wide without risk of interruption?"

"Your place or mine?" she asked.

"Either or neither. I need to know how dangerous you are before I make an inappropriate suggestion."

She snorted in laughter. "Follow me."
She headed for the door and I followed.

We wound up at an all-night diner three blocks from the party.

"You're the only other magicker I know," she admitted as we each wrapped ourselves around steaming coffee mugs. Her eyes darted from one corner of the room to another, always on the lookout. I realized I was doing the same. Our individual coatings were flipping on and off as we sipped our drinks.

"Do you know how you do that?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Nope. I just do it. Every now and then I discover something else I can do that I never suspected before. I just learned to cloak myself a few years ago. I can't cloak anyone else, though, like you did tonight. I'd like to know how to do that. How many...?"

"I could have done everybody in the room tonight," I admitted, "but they would have been upset that they couldn't drink. I once coated my whole house. Cars are a cinch, too.

"What else can you do?"

The salt shaker started to move smoothly but slowly toward me. Suddenly, the salt turned pale blue before becoming white again. She laughed. A small — well, 'two and a half feet tall' small — green dragon appeared briefly by my side before evaporating. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed, but nobody had.

"Was that...?"

"Just for you," she said. "Nobody else could see it but you."

"We'd make a hell of a nightclub act," I mused.

Most of our 'talents' were of such a nature that you wouldn't think they were valuable enough to mention. Our ability to protectively coat ourselves was an obvious exception. She was as impressed with my ability to dust objects as I was with her telekinesis and hallucinogenesis.

We talked for almost an hour, and exchanged telephone numbers and addresses before I offered to drive her home.

"I brought my own."

I walked her back toward where the party had been and made sure her motorcycle started before I drove myself home.

I quietly dropped all my other lady-friends and concentrated on Susan. It seemed quite obvious to me that we were meant to be together, at least temporarily.

"I wonder how many others there are like us?" I mused one night at dinner.

"I've often wondered that myself," Susan agreed, "but there seems no way to ask that question without exposing myself, something I'd rather not do. There's another facet to that that scares me: suppose one of those

'others', if they exist, wants to do me harm? I took an awful chance with you that night at the party when we first met."

We discussed and quickly discarded the idea of putting an ad in a newspaper. We discussed and quickly discarded the idea of forming a magic act. Susan found a website for the local Magicians' Cooperative and applied for membership.

Within a week she was receiving information about 'gigs' for which she might apply, and invitations to casual get-togethers with other local magicians. She Rsvp'd to several on our behalf, intending to use any opportunity that arose to demonstrate what we were certain would be inexplicable tricks. To help us pull off an air of professionalism, we actually practiced a few of them, an action that looked an awful lot like 'forming a magic act'.

The one I liked best was to select an object from the host's decor — an object that could not, because of that, be one of our props — and changing its color repeatedly as a cloth alternately covered it and revealed it. We also found that most hosts had one or two objects that they could stand to lose forever. "It's going away," I would warn them, "and it's never coming back." The victim knickknack would be placed on a table covered with a cloth, and the cloth would suddenly collapse flat as the object was reduced to dust. "Okay," one magician probed, "that's a great trick, but where did the thing go?" Some of them were pretty upset when we wouldn't share how the trick was done.

Susan had also given up all her men-friends after she met me, and since we were dating nobody except each other, we often went trolling — her term for walking in dangerous parts of town looking like marks. Together, we did a better job than the local police of removing criminals and weapons from the streets. Did you know that even junky old guns can be worth hundreds of dollars? The nice stuff can bring in much more if I take the time to clean them up ahead of time.

One of Susan's old boyfriends was a cop, and Harvey would check our booty against some nationwide database cops can get to to see if any of them had been reported stolen. Those we handed over to the police to be returned, we hoped, to their proper owners. The remainder we sold in private sales with no paper trail.

"Where are you getting all this stuff?" Harvey demanded of her.

"Marty looks like an easy mark," she explained. "He's not. By the time they figure that out, Marty is holding their guns on them."

"So, why doesn't Marty just call the cops at that point?" Harvey pressed.

Susan laughed. "Because you guys tend to ask too many questions that don't really need to be asked!"

"And I'll bet the answers are pretty interesting, too!" he offered.

"Yeah," Susan agreed, "some of the answers would probably cause Marty more trouble than he's willing to put up with, yup, but the police commissioner probably likes the effects. Your crime numbers are on the decline, aren't they?"

"Yes, until Marty runs into somebody who's faster than him. Then he'll be a part of our crime numbers."

Susan shrugged. "My money's on Marty."

Publicity

Whether it was Harvey who ran his mouth in an unguarded moment or someone else that either he or we thought trustworthy — and there were very few of those — the fact of the matter is that our names began to be bandied about in journalistic circles. Who can blame a reporter for following up on a story with obvious local interest? Crime is being reduced and the police have no plausible explanation. Suddenly someone in a position to know suggests that Batman and Robin are loose on the streets of Gotham. I know I would be jumping on such a lead if I were still a reporter.

I always let calls from unknown numbers go to voicemail where the caller can leave a message. It's a good way to screen sales calls, spam calls, and robocalls. It also gives me a breathing space where, as in this case, I can collect my thoughts and not have to shoot from the hip, as it were:

"Hi, this is Tom Lincoln from The Globe. There's a rumor circulating that you might be connected to the recent plunge in street crime, and I wanted to give you a chance to respond before I break the story. Call me back at 867-5309. My deadline is tomorrow at noon."

I called Susan to fill her in and get her thoughts.

"This is not good news," she sighed. "It would be very good, and I mean 'very very good', if we were able to talk him out of this story. At the very least, we need to keep him from making our names public. I would be seriously contemplating hurting him if that's what's necessary to stay in the shadows."

I thought about her words for a long moment. "That probably won't be necessary, but it has given me an idea about how I can handle this. I'm going to call him and invite him over for a quiet chat. Do you want to be here for it?"

"Nope. The less involved I am, the happier I'll be."

"Okay. I'll let you know how it goes."

Tom wanted to bring a photographer with him. I told him it probably wouldn't be either necessary or productive. He came alone. We sat and sipped iced tea on my sun porch while he asked me questions and I did my best to evade answering them.

"Look," I said as he was beginning to realize he wasn't going to get much of anything from me, "there are just two possibilities here: one, I am the guy who's being such a pain in the ass to local criminals, and two, I'm not. Let's consider both of those.

"If I am some Batman-like threat to local criminals, do you really want to blow my cover and end my career? I can't imagine your readers being very happy that, largely through your efforts, crime makes a comeback in our peaceful little burg.

"But it's the other side of that coin that most seriously concerns me. If I'm not some superhuman crime fighter able to escape 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', are you going to want to be the guy who painted a great big target on my back? How are you going to explain this when I turn up dead, a victim of shadowy underworld figures? I can absolutely guarantee that you will be the primary target of the largest libel suit in American journalistic history if that happens. My family will not be in a forgiving mood after my funeral. I'm urging you not to put me in a position where I have to go into hiding in order to stay alive."

While I delivered this pitch, I envisioned gripping his right forearm tightly and was mildly surprised to see him apparently favoring that area, occasionally shaking it as if to help the circulation.

"There's another aspect to this matter that ought to concern you, personally, greatly," I continued, and I now envisioned poking his left arm with an awl. "If it is true that I have special powers that some people find sufficiently unpleasant that they are unable to continue a life of crime because of them, and you find yourself on my bad side, that would be something you would regret, don't you think?" He was now rubbing his left arm with his right hand, having stopped taking notes altogether.

"It comes down to this: you either believe I'm some supremely dangerous person, or you do not believe that. If you do, why would you run the risk of making yourself my enemy? If you do not believe it, why would you write a story that — there's no nice way to put this — libels me?

"In short, there are many reasons for you to not write this story the way you seem to have planned it, and almost no reason for you to go public with what, I assure you, is the most nonsensical thing I have heard in my life.

"Please don't do this. The only thing you'll accomplish is to harm both of us. I know you don't want that, and I swear I don't, either."

Tom Lincoln nodded in silence, thinking. "You make a very persuasive case, Mr. Durkin. I think you should consider that you have won the day."

"So, the story is dead?" I asked.

"Yes. Without a smoking gun or catching you red-handed, there's just not enough here to make a plausible case that you're the Midnight Marauder."

I laughed at that. "I have one question for you that I need to have answered," I finished up. "Who gave you this lead that pointed at me?"

He suddenly got very serious. "I can't give up a source!"

"Wait," I remonstrated, "whoever gave you this reeking pile of horse manure is not 'a source'. Whoever it was was merely someone who passed along a barely-believable anecdote that you've now determined isn't worth following up on — or maybe is too dangerous to follow up on, or would violate the public's trust to follow up on. Unless that sort of whispered nonsense counts as 'a lead', that person isn't 'a source', and I need to know who it is so I can put a stop to gossip. You owe me that."

"I'll think about it," he said before closing his notebook and departing.

In the end, he didn't run the story. Susan was pleased. So was I, but we had to be very circumspect in our activities after that because anyone could have been surveilling us and we might not know it until we had provided them with the smoking gun Tom Lincoln didn't have.

Susan and I invited Harvey over for dinner one night and we had a very interesting conversation regarding 'confidentiality'. Harvey swore up and down that he had revealed our identities to no one.

"Well, somebody knows!" Susan pressed him.

"Of course, somebody knows!" he came back. "I had to tell them something when I'm running checks on a new gun every other week, and sometimes several in a week, and returning the clean ones to someone not on the force! There are several people in the department who know I have a connection to the mysterious vigilante who's making our town a safer place, but nobody knows it's you two."

Harvey speculated that anyone who knew he, Harvey, was involved might have made the connection to Harvey's circle of friends, and that could have implicated me or Susan or both of us.

I showed Susan my trick of concentrating on inflicting pain on a subject and she discovered she could do it as well. Pain is a great tongue-loosener, and this talent left no physical evidence behind. With the information we managed to gather using it, we could proactively go after people in the crime biz we might otherwise never have encountered in the normal course of our activities.

The Chief of Police was not happy when we blew the whistle on his nephew, and we weren't particularly happy to learn that several firearms we thought were being restored to their rightful owners had been, instead,

funneled straight back onto our streets. For that, the nephew went up for 7-to-13.

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I kept a running inventory of the stuff we collected along with serial numbers where they were available, and the date we collected each, whether we sold it or turned it over to the cops, and the date and price for those we sold. Over the course of 2½ years, Susan and I collected 97 handguns, of which 19 had obliterated serial numbers (we gave those to Harvey for disposal), and 41 had been reported 'stolen' (and we hoped the cops actually routed those back to their owners). The remaining 37 we sold, usually to private buyers at one of the local gun shows or at pistol ranges, for a grand total of over \$16,000, which Susan and I split 50-50.

Every once in a very great while, we would come across something that required ATF paperwork — paperwork that probably didn't exist for them. Susan didn't want them, so I kept those and stored them in a gun safe that was also wrapped to prevent tampering. I now have three select-fire UZIs, a suppressed M3A1, and two suppressed STENs. At least once a year I take them out, clean them, oil them, and put them back.

No, I have no idea what I'm going to do with them. If you have any suggestions, I'll be happy to hear them.