

IN A NUTSHELL

Homer Liwag is the nicest guy in magic. That's how every anecdote about Homer begins. Anyone who knows him and has a story to share begins it with that sentence. (Perhaps, dear reader, you should mentally insert that sentence into the beginning of the following 29 stories.) Kenner will tell you that Homer is the "nicest, sweetest, most generous guy you'll ever meet." But he's much more than that.

David Copperfield told me that Homer Liwag is "the one person I know who is closest to being a true Renaissance man. He can design things, light things. He also does sound editing, video editing. Of course, he's a great artist. I've worked with many collaborators and magic consultants, but none of them have had the range of skills and sensibilities that Homer has; they certainly couldn't put pen to paper in such an amazing way. None made me want to challenge them in a multitude of diverse areas like Homer has." Copperfield is widely known as a perfectionist, and he works with the best designers and artists in the world, so when he says something like this, it's significant. Homer is one of Copperfield's (not-so) secret weapons.

Homer has been working for Copperfield for thirteen years as a conceptual artist and designer. However, even before he met Copperfield, he was an underground sleight-of-hand legend. All the great sleight-of-hand artists familiar with his work describe his technique as flawless, his timing



broad toothy smile, and his hands. He has leathery, wrinkled hands. Tommy Wonder hands.

Probably the worst hands for sleight of hand

I've ever seen. His pinkies don't

fold all the way in. He's got gaps between his fingers, and yet he's hailed as one of the very best coin men alive. As Bob Kohler put it, he's been relentless enough to work on techniques that fit his hands and the way he manipulates things.

COMPOSITION

I ask where his artistic sensibilities come from. He says, "When I was in grade school, I used to sit at home and meticulously draw props and vehicles from TV shows such as *Batman* and *Battlestar Galactica* and movies like *Star Wars*. I studied the artwork of Joe Johnston, who was the art director/concept artist for the original *Star Wars* trilogy, and I decided at a young age that I wanted to draw and design props and ships for science fiction and fantasy movies.

"My dad is an artist. He can draw anything, paint anything, sculpt anything. He can capture emotion in an uncanny way. Once I showed my dad some drawings I'd found in a book that I thought were great drawings. He said they were terrible, and I said, 'Why?' He said, 'The composition is awful.' That made me start thinking about composition and how important it is. Some of my favorite photographs and images in movies are all about lighting and composition.

"Thoughts of composition apply to everything I do, whether it's editing music or writing a piece for the show or doing displays at the warehouse. I see things in colors. Certain colors are heavier than others.

perfect, and his methods diabolical. He's the best coin magician you've never seen.

Chris Korn says, "Everything he touches turns to gold, and not just magic. Piano playing, tennis, golf. He reads manuals. He became a good tennis player by reading. He would read it, absorb it, and make that connection between the brain and the hands, unlike almost anybody. He's the guy who reads the whole manual. Nobody does that. Homer will read it, then look up the tips and tricks on the Internet. If he's gonna learn something, he will fully absorb it. He's an endless sponge."

DONALD KAUFMAN

My fifth day in Vegas, to my great surprise, Donald Kaufman calls me. In a distinct nasal voice, he tells me he's spent some time with Homer, and will see what he can do to help me with the article.

I patiently explain that I have an appointment to meet with Homer that night and that I think I have it under control, but after I leave Vegas, if I have any lingering questions, maybe he can do some supplementary investigation.

RELENTLESS

I meet Homer at a restaurant between shows. In person, the first three things you notice about him are his spiky hair, his



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If an illusion feels short, it doesn't have a lot of depth. I picture it as a lot of light brush strokes and no bold strokes. I think of the timeline of the illusion, where it starts with a bold stroke, and small little strokes that show a building of the story, followed by a bold stroke that is the climax of the illusion, accompanied by a big swell of the music and settling down into the applause."

He continues along these lines for several more minutes, but I can't quite follow him. I remember a quote from Derek DelGaudio that I had dismissed at the time as a joke, but realize now he was serious: "Homer's brain works differently. He's too creative, too artistic. Not normal enough. You can't have a conversation with him because he's seeing shapes and colors in his head."

COMPETITION

In 1988, Homer got second place in a magic contest and his prize was working the lounge at Illusions for a week. Carl Andrews had offered the prize, but he was no longer working at Illusions, so Mike Close inherited the young contest winner. Close felt a little uneasy because he didn't know who Homer was. He had won a close-up contest and this was a stand-up gig. Close told Homer, "How about you just come do some close-up for a week, and we'll figure out some money?" That week stretched into almost four years.

Homer loved the atmosphere at Illusions. He loved being around other magicians and working on tricks. He was willing to do anything just to be around — tend bar, bus tables — just to hang out. He had no money, so he slept on a futon in Kenner's apartment. "It was my first venue where I performed for real people," Homer explains. "I wasn't doing gigs before then. Everything I know about performing I learned at Illusions."

CLOSING TIME

Chris Korn says, "When you went in to work at Illusions, you were excited to fry your buddies, but the magic you developed had to work for laymen and magicians. You had to fool both audiences. It was more of a challenge, but it also made it really exciting. After closing hours, we'd go back to the apartment, get frozen pizzas, and practice until the sun came up. We would work on a new vanish for seven hours. I have

videotapes where we worked on the French drop for four-and-a-half hours. When Homer does it, it's the most magical thing. He refined it, finessed it. Made it look like something completely different. The whole idea was to leave the coin in space and time, with your hands rotating around where the coin is. It looks like real magic.

"I used to refer to Homer as the silent genius. He would not say a whole lot. He'd sit and think. Homer had the ability to see someone's move that they'd been working on for thirteen years — he would analyze it, and if he had permission to play with it, literally by the next day, he'd be doing it better than the performer. It was frightening. You knew that if you showed it to Homer, it was gonna get better. He knows instinctively why a technique works or what is wrong with a move and how to correct it. And his hands and mind work together much quicker than anybody I ever met."

INNER SECRETS OF DONALD KAUFMAN

I'm waiting to meet Homer after he gets off work, and reading a book to pass time. Late in the afternoon, a fax comes in from Donald, saying he's met with Homer and has some interesting information.

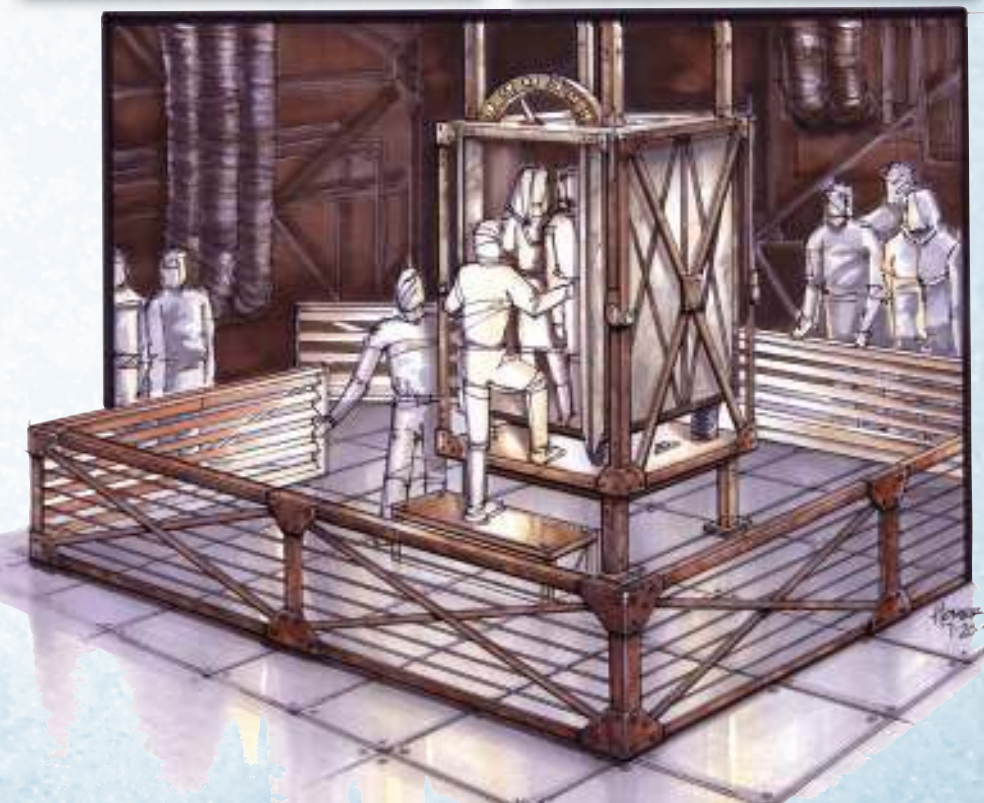
To: John Lovick
From: Donald Kaufman

I think I have the info that will be the "key" into Homer. He

has gout. Gout, in case you don't know, is when you have a high level of uric acid in your blood and your kidneys are not filtering it, so uric acid crystals are deposited in the cartilage and tissue surrounding your joints. It is extremely painful, because the crystals grind into your joints and surrounding tissue. It can eventually cripple you.

I've done some research. Famous sufferers of gout have been Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, Karl Marx, Pablo Neruda, Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin. So, apparently, it mostly afflicts scientists, poets, and founding fathers. Why the hell Homer Liwag has it is a mystery.

When his gout was at its worst, Homer only had one cue in Copperfield's show, which was to walk out, pick up a large Plexiglas box and hold it out in front of himself. It hurt so much to walk that he had to hop out on one foot. He was so embarrassed about hopping out onstage that he asked the spotlight operator not to turn the light on him until he got to the box and stopped. Standing still was not easy either, because he had to hold the box with his arms completely outstretched, and since he was standing on one



foot, this put him off balance.

He approached the gout the same way he approaches everything else in his life. A very Homerized approach. He did as much research as he could and, in a disciplined, structured way, beat it into submission. He got it under control by watching his weight, monitoring his diet, exercising, and taking medication. He lost thirty pounds in two months. When he went back for a check-up, the doctor thought he had the wrong paperwork. The severity of the gout, his weight, cholesterol, and uric acid levels had changed so much he thought Homer was a different patient.

IMDB OR NOT 2B

Interesting little tidbit, I think as I read the fax, but hardly useful or enlightening. I look up Donald Kaufman on IMDb and find out that he has only one credit. He lucked out because his brother let him work on a script with him. I send him a fax, which basically says, “Thanks, but no thanks. I can handle this.” I tell him, if he gets any other scoops, he can send them directly to Stan.

THE ONE WHERE HOMER TRIES TO FLUNK OUT

Working at Illusions began to take its toll on Homer. As he explains it, “I was never a very disciplined student. I was fortunate enough to go to one of the top colleges in the country for industrial design, the University of Cincinnati. But I was a horrible student. I did well the first couple years. It was a five-year program. By the fourth year, I was traveling to Illusions every weekend, supposedly coming back on Monday, but usually deciding to stay a few extra days to help fill in. Next thing you

know, I’d be spending a week and a half at a time at Illusions, crashing on Chris’ couch. Before long I was spending 75% of my time in Indiana and 25% at school.”

CAN YOU DEMO PERVERSION?

While juggling college and close-up at Illusions, Homer found time to also work with Kenner on *Magic Man Examiner*, a groundbreaking magic newsletter. It featured cutting-edge sleight of hand, off-the-wall humor, and an innovative, ahead-of-its-time visual style. During this same two-year period, they also wrote, illustrated, and designed the best-selling book of Chris’ material called *Totally Out of Control*.

By working on the newsletter and the book, Homer was applying everything he was supposed to be studying at school. He was learning graphic design and doing real-world work, but school was being left behind. Eventually, he just said, “Forget school. I’m moving to Indiana.” He dropped out in his sixth year of a five-year program. He had repeated his fifth year to try to catch up on classes he missed.

Most nights, Homer and Chris would work at Illusions from 4:30 in the afternoon until 2 a.m., then work on the book or the newsletter till 5 a.m. They’d get up the following afternoon, rinse, and repeat. They tried to have fun with both projects and not take anything too seriously. As they typed up routines, they’d create funny trick titles to make each other laugh, and the names never got changed. Names like Four Coins and a Filipino, Hellbound, and Perversion. Now, fifteen years later, people still approach them and ask if they can demo Perversion, and they have to think, *What’s that?*

THIRTEEN

I’m frustrated that while Homer has been as cooperative as he can be with his schedule, ultimately, I will not have spent enough time with him to have enough for an article. I call Kenner, hoping he can somehow help in juggling Homer’s schedule; I’m really worried about my deadline. Chris is well aware of my quandary as I’ve been bitching about it for most of the time I’ve been in town. He says, “Just make something up. You know enough about him. He’s Chinese or whatever.”

THE ODYSSEY

Chris, of course, left Illusions to work for David Copperfield, and

after Homer’s week in Vegas art directing props for them, Chris looked for more job opportunities for Homer, because Chris was lonely. He needed a buddy around him. He was willing to do anything to bring Homer out — take a pay cut, let him stay in his room, whatever it took.

One day, one of David’s administrative assistants quit. Suddenly, there was an opening for a clerical position. Kenner called Homer and said, “What are you doing right now? There’s a plane ticket waiting for you at the airport. Can you be on a plane in two hours? Pack your bags.” The urgency was because Chris did not want David to change his mind. If given the chance to think about it overnight, he might have said, “Not now.” Homer packed his bags in less than fifteen minutes and was on a plane that night. Copperfield explains, “We needed a body. We had so much going on, and we needed help. He came out to help. He did filing and typed letters at first.”

THE FEDEX TRICK

Homer quickly learned things are unpredictable in the Copperfield universe, and he got an opportunity to prove himself his third day on the job. David needed to FedEx a gift of some videotapes to Gianni Versace that night, and the tapes needed to be attractively packaged in less than four hours. Homer said, “Here’s a list of what I need. Black board, silver ribbon, labels for the ribbon, etc.” He proceeded to make a package that looked like it was bought from a high-end department store: a box with a pullout tray using black board that he scored and inserts that the tapes fit into perfectly. He designed and printed elegant labels and folded tissue paper immaculately.

David needed to approve everything, but he was onstage. So Chris went out onstage to do his normal cue within a trick. Chris palmed one of the labels and, while handing him a prop, showed the label to David, so the audience couldn’t see it. David nodded his approval, and Chris exited. Homer wrapped the ribbon around the tissue paper, which was wrapped around a book. He held it up in the wings and shone a flashlight on it to get David’s attention. David approved it without missing a beat.

The FedEx guy arrived to pick up the package before it was ready. FedEx employees are not allowed to wait for packages; it’s their policy. Kenner said, “Hey, we do a FedEx trick in the show. Have you ever seen it? Here come backstage.” Chris took him backstage to stall and, after about fifteen minutes, said, “Oh, the FedEx trick’s

not gonna happen for a while.” They arrived back in the office the second Homer finished. The hell of it is, they found out later that Versace wasn’t even home the next day to receive the package.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Dan and Dave Buck live in Las Vegas at Cathy Daly’s house. Cathy is Copperfield’s associate producer, and so the Bucks have spent a lot of time around the Copperfield organization. I call them knowing they’ll be good for a Homer story or two. Here’s a transcript of the conversation.

ME: Hey, what can you tell me about Homer? How often do you see him?

DAN: We don’t hang with him.

[Pause.]

DAVE: He always goes home. [Pause.]

Maybe that’s why his name is Homer.

DAN: Too bad his parents didn’t name him Partier.

[Pause.]

DAVE: Cause then he’d party.

Get it?

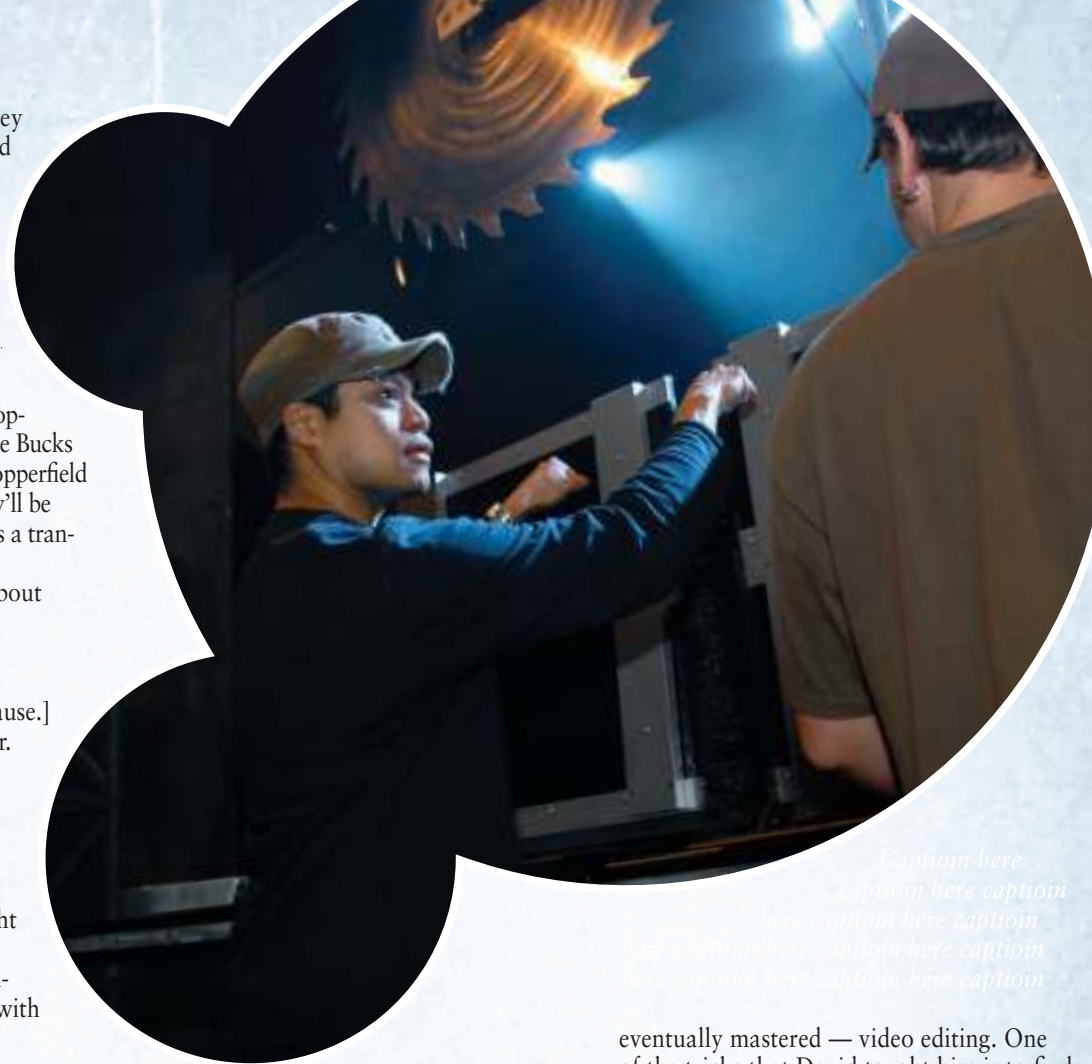
End of conversation. On the bright side, I might get some mileage from the fact that this was the longest verified conversation anyone’s ever had with the Buck brothers.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN MAGIC

After Homer had been on the road for about three or four months, David was having the Vertical Sawing illusion redesigned. The illusion uses a giant blade, like a ten-foot-tall X-acto knife. David wanted to redesign the post that held it. Homer was putting in twelve-hour days on clerical work. He didn’t have time to do design work. So he stayed up late that night and started drawing. He redesigned not just the post that held the blade, but the shaft and the blade. He designed a very intricate industrial-looking shaft. David was impressed with his drawings. Within a couple months, it was built, and Homer got to see his first piece of illusion design realized.

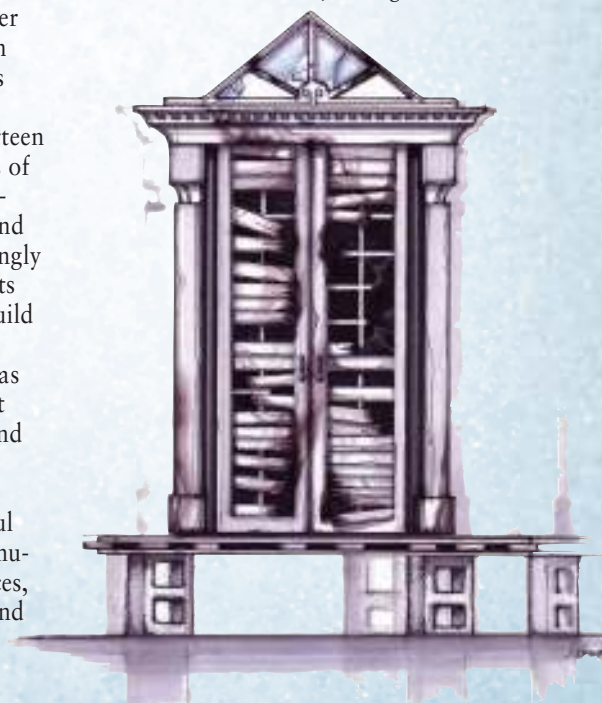
Homer continued to do drawings at lunch, late at night, and on his days off. By the end of his first year, he was doing 20% clerical work and 80% design work.

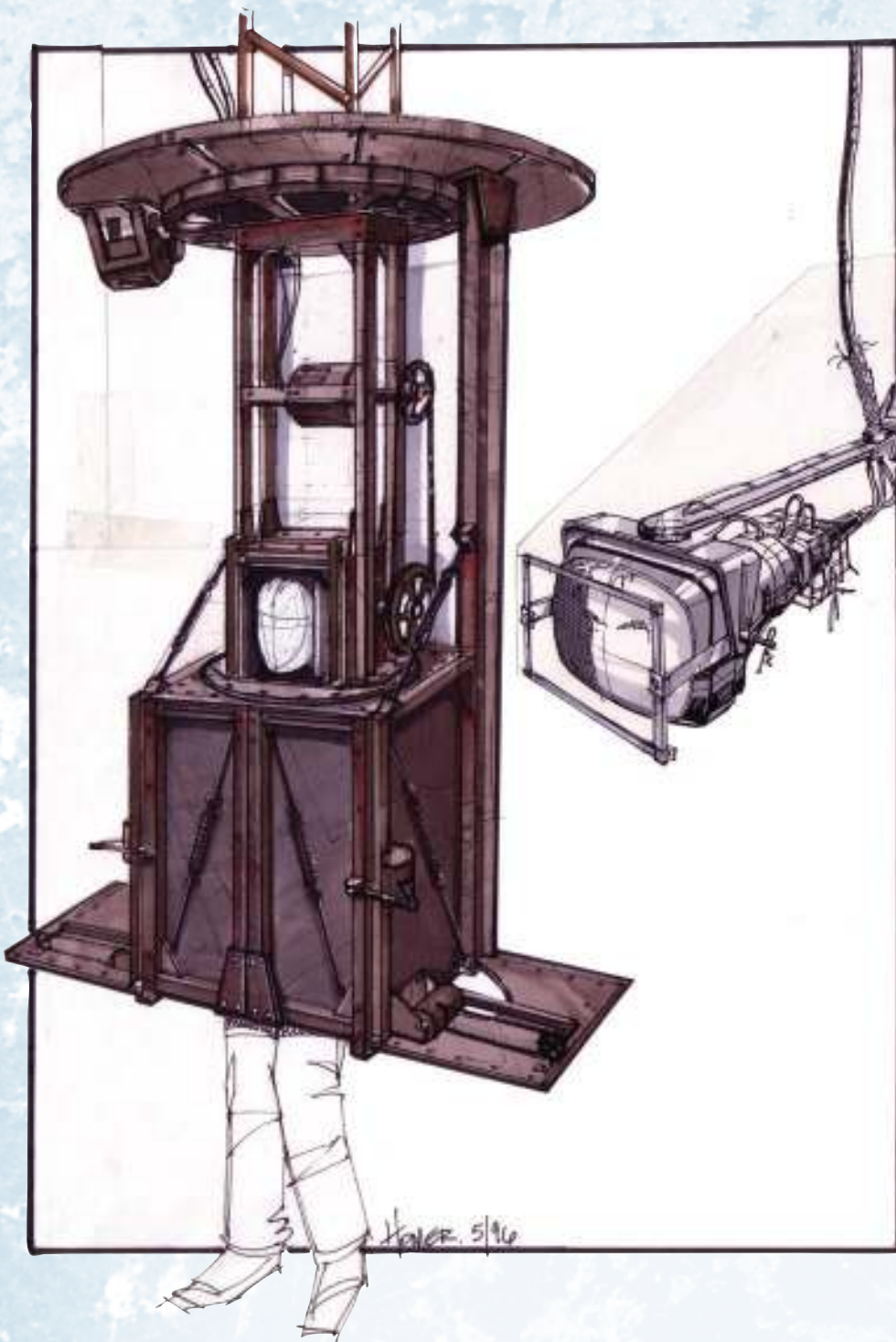
Over the years, Homer has done design work on the Appearing Car, the Barclay House (the Spirit Cabinet), David’s version of an André Kole barrel illusion, the Panty Swap illusion, Splitting Image (the Laser trick), the vanish platform and the reappearance bed in the Voyeur illusion, Thirteen (the audience vanish), Portal (the beach trick), The Sonogram, The Scorpion, and the Steel Penetration.



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eventually mastered — video editing. One of the tricks that David taught him is to find the biggest part of the music and put it at the climax of the trick, and see what happens, see how the music falls before that when you rewind. Happy accidents happen all the time. You keep the good moments and adjust the bad. Another option is to re-choreograph, which, interestingly enough, can be done via editing. If people are moving across the stage too slow, Homer will edit them to walk faster and, during the next





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have something for David to look at. If you don't have a two-step ladder or a hammer, you improvise.

Over the years Homer has become expert at things he never dreamed of. For example, David has one of the world's largest collections of vintage coin-operated arcade machines. Homer has restored many of them. He doesn't just restore them, he finds out the kinds of materials originally used and uses the same materials. He talks to people at the Smithsonian. He has also learned how to repaint something, but make it look aged to maintain the integrity — so it's in great shape, but still looks its age, with a natural patina. Restoration is an art form. "It's like what we did with the Water Torture Cell," Kenner explains. "We aged it in three days, while still doing three or four shows a day. Homer oversaw the entire project. I was useless. I just ran around making sure Homer had what he needed. All the metal and glass were Houdini originals, but some of the wood was lost in a fire. Cathy found reclaimed 100-year-old wood from some church in Nantucket. We came to the warehouse at 8 a.m. and worked till the first show at 2 p.m. Then we worked between shows and after the last show into the early hours of the morning."

For Homer, working for Copperfield is a dream job because opportunities arise every week to learn. For example, David will want shots of some building interior. Homer looks at it as an opportunity to learn about photographing interiors. He'll volunteer to take the pictures and will get a book about lighting interiors. He adds, "If someone says, 'Let's play racquetball tomorrow,' and I've never played, I don't show up and just start playing. I study and learn what the rules are and the moves. I take everything as an opportunity to learn how to do something. David bought a fortune-telling arcade machine, like in the movie *Big*. There are only two of these in the world. He wanted to see what curtains would look like on the interior, and we didn't have a seamstress, so I learned how to sew. I took a sewing machine out of the case. I learned to sew that night and stayed up till 6 a.m. sewing curtains. One more skill under my belt.

It makes David more comfortable knowing that his crew can do more things themselves. The more they keep in house, the faster the creative process. Say David wants to see what a table would look like at a particular thickness. If you have to wait a day to see it, you can lose your creative process, your inspiration. But if they can rig

something together in twenty minutes, the creative process keeps flowing and tricks get developed.

Homer's creative input isn't limited to drawing, building, and sewing. David Copperfield explained, "We have a joke that after a member of the team creates something, we often have it Homerized. Which is our way of saying, we give it to Homer to tweak and he adds another level of polish. Right now I'm restaging an old illusion. I want to do the Fan Illusion again, but I want to update it. Take out the '80s. Take out the posing and dancing. Take out the girl. I want to do the illusion alone, make it simpler and cleaner. Homer can restage it, and make it more contemporary. I can trust him to take the lighting cues and music cues and massage them, and put the illusion back on its feet. Homer is not a musician, but he has an amazing sense of music, timing, and composition, and these inform everything. When he is working on lighting, his sense of music really helps with the transitions, or when he's staging an illusion, his sense of timing dictates how a person should, for example, grab a cloth and pull it off a prop."

COINONE: BEHIND THE MAGIC

Homer's *CoinOne* DVD is, by most accounts, the single best magic video yet produced. The trick itself looks like a miracle. The camera work, editing, art direction, music, and packaging are aesthetically light-years ahead of any other magic DVDs on the market. I decide I should take another look at it. Perhaps examining Homer's creations will better prepare me for my next interview.

While I'm contemplating this, Donald Kaufman calls to ask if I'm interested in some medical research papers he's found about gout. (I'm not). I mention I'm going to take another look at Homer's DVD. Donald tells me he's got one and that he'll have it delivered to my hotel. That afternoon it arrives with a note attached:

To: John Lovick
 From: Donald Kaufman

Here's the DVD. I asked Homer about 'the making of' and here are some notes I've made based on our conversation.

CoinOne exists because Homer

wanted to experiment with his new hobby. He'd been spending a lot of money on photo, video, and lighting equipment. Chris Kenner suggested he could produce a magic DVD to help pay for all this equipment. "Make your hobby pay," he said.

Homer thought of Four Coins and a Filipino, a coin routine he'd published in *Magic Man Examiner* over a decade ago, which he'd seen very few people do correctly. People don't seem to understand it from the text, which he acknowledges is probably his fault because he wrote it. He thought it might be better if put on video.

It was shot in about two days, and he did it all himself. No cameraman. And he did all the lighting. He only used one camera, but his goal was to shoot and edit it in such a way that it would look as if it were a two-camera shoot, with tight, seamless cuts. He says, "I did it just for a fun project for myself. Not to make money or add to my reputation. Just a fun side project. I'd be working at the warehouse, come home at 2 a.m. and start editing. I pulled a couple all-nighters."

He adds, "I wanted to learn. I didn't just want to go to a studio and have someone shoot me doing magic and make a video of it. I wanted to do everything myself. I could have shot it in Copperfield's warehouse and had a beautiful background with huge props behind me and elaborate lighting.

Instead, I used my own lights, borrowed the camera from Chris, and shot it all in my living room. I didn't want anyone to say, 'He used Copperfield's resources. Of course it looks good.' I wanted to get credit for doing it all on my own. I also wanted to showcase Aimée, who did the artwork, and the music of my friend Jim Grote, who I've known since we were sixteen back in Cincinnati."

As for the packaging, Homer was very interested in the presentation. He says, "If you buy a pen in Japan, it comes in four different

wrappers. It's beautifully presented. I wanted to put something out that was quality from the packaging to the advertising." The single disc sits in a six-panel digipak. The package is then encased in an anti-static bag with an anti-static warning label. Then, the whole thing is protected by a corrugated cardboard wrap, which is hand-grommeted together. The packaging cost about \$3 per unit. With most videos, you press them, do a cover, and put them in an Amaray case for about a dollar each.

Spending three times what you have to on packaging may sound economically foolish, but perhaps it's not. Homer's logic was, "There are always people who will be copying it and uploading it. It's always going to happen. My goal was to produce a product that had enough perceived value that people would want to own it and not just watch it."

Beautifully produced packaging as a deterrent to piracy. It's possible.

AT HOME WITH HOMER

Homer and his girlfriend, Aimée, host a small dinner party at their house for some of their magician friends. The house is a typical, new Las Vegas home. Homer designed all the landscaping. If you look carefully at the rock formations in the front yard, you'll see tiny *Star Wars* figurines arranged in dramatic tableaux against their natural scale-model landscapes. I'm instantly jealous I don't have that at my house.

The interior is white and spare with a pool table in the living room and examples of Aimée's artwork competing for space with expensive *Star Wars* memorabilia. Before long, an informal pool championship is in full swing. Homer displays the proficiency you'd expect from someone with his disciplined approach to all activities. While getting trounced, Ricky Smith declares, "I hate you, Homer, and your goddamn skills." Homer then misses what should have been the game-winning shot and Derek DelGaudio quips, "Well, I guess we won't be seeing the *PoolOne* DVD any time soon."

Homer attends to the food and fills the counter with appetizers he's made. It turns out he can cook, too. The chicken kabobs are such a hit that Derek says, "Homer, what are these, dipped in angel tears?"

rehearsal, choreograph them to move faster.

Homer has edited a couple of career retrospective videos for David, and Francis Coppola wrote a letter saying he'd like to show them to his editors as an example of what a great tribute video is like. Homer didn't think much of it, but David pointed out what a great compliment it is, that Francis Coppola wants to show his editors one of Homer's montages as an example of great editing.

I'VE HEARD AS MUCH

With Homer working during the day, I have to find things to do with my time. I go to Harrah's and see Mac King's show. Afterward, Mac

asks me what I'm doing in town. I tell him that I'm trying to write an article about Homer Liwag, and that I'm struggling a little bit with it.

Mac says, "You know why? Because he doesn't exist."

I WANT TO BE BIG

When you work for Copperfield, you need to be flexible and able to improvise. If you need a prototype of a prop built, you can wait and have it tomorrow morning when Home Depot opens or you can grab a couple pizza boxes from catering and cut them up, tape them together, and



I sneak Aimée to a back office for a quick interview. Aimée is a petite blonde with a cartoon voice and cute as a button. I ask her what's important to Homer, and she says, "Work. He keeps his personal life separate from work. He balances it out fine." Next, "Other than you and Kenner, who are Homer's best friends?" There is a five-second pause. She says, "Best friends?" Another five-second pause. She slowly starts. "He's got his work and his off time. His off time is Aimée. And his work is David, Chris, Cathy. That's his world."

I explain that I know something about Homer as an artist and magician, but I want to learn about him as a person. I ask her to tell me a story about the two of them and their life together. Aimée perks up, "He once was on tour in Asia and he sent me this strange picture, an apparently random photograph of his disheveled desk. He said it was a clue to my birthday present that month. Turns out that if you search the photo *Where's Waldo*-style, in the reflection in a mirror was a plane ticket to meet Homer in Taiwan! That was a great surprise."

I ask Aimée about the various *Star Wars* landscape photos that are featured in the house. What appear to be the sand dunes of a vast Tatooine desertscape are actually the curves of a nude female with toy *Star Wars* figurines arranged on the body. She explains, "Those were an idea he had a few years ago, when he was starting to get into photography. They turned out awesome. He set it up. He said, 'Lay down here.' He adjusted the light, created Tatooine, and took the pictures. It was fun. We did them all in one night."

MORE INNER SECRETS OF DONALD KAUFMAN

Fax to: John Lovick
From: Donald Kaufman

I talked to Brett Wolf, Copperfield's company manager, who has known Homer for over twenty years. I asked about Homer's beginnings as a young sleight-of-hand hot shot, and he shared the following story.

Brett Wolf: "In the summer of 1988, I was visiting my uncle in Kansas City. I received a call from Homer, who was interning in St. Louis. This was way before cell phones and, to this day, I am not sure how he knew my uncle's phone number! Anyway, Homer told me there was a convention near me and asked if I wanted to go.

"We arrived at the Conjuror's Conclave penniless. We barely had enough money to eat, let alone register or get a hotel room. The plan was to sleep in Homer's van and sneak into as many events as possible.

"After our first refusal of admission, our plan changed. I would have long conversations with people in the lobby and misdirect them as Homer stared at the attendee's badges. It took several conversations as the badge was complicated with a wizard, stars, and a crystal ball. All Homer had was a set of drafting pens, and we didn't have the beige paper the badges were printed on. We drove to

the local Pizza Hut, spending what little money we had to eat and figure out the next step.

"The magic gods were looking out for us because Pizza Hut's table tents were printed on the perfect same-colored paper. Homer quickly grabbed a table tent and started drawing the badge from memory on the backside. The badges were amazing.

So good, in fact, at one point Homer lost his badge in the bathroom. The badge was returned to him... by the president of the convention.

"The temperatures were in the 100s. So, we spent as much time as possible in the air-conditioned lobby, sessioning.

When the sessions ended, we would be forced to retire to the van. But, the temperatures would be deadly high by 6 a.m.

"Pushing our luck even further, we decided to enter the close-up contest. One of the things Homer was going to do - which he never really tested - was a Reverse Card on Ceiling. He was going to toss the deck up and the deck would stick to the ceiling and the selected card would fall down into his hands. He had a card selected and signed. He had a deck that was glued together with a golf-ball-sized ball of wax. He threw the deck up, but the room had a drop ceiling. The deck hit the ceiling, the panel lifted up, and the deck fell down into Homer's hands with a chunk of the ceiling stuck to the back of it. Total disaster. He had no out. Homer looked up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, there's the selected card." I looked up and the drop ceiling had fallen back into place pinching the selected card by its corner against the frame and the selected card was just dangling from the ceiling by a corner. Homer said, "Thank you very much. Enjoy the rest of the convention. My name's Homer Liwag." He walked offstage. We calmly walked outside to the front lawn and collapsed on the ground laughing hysterically. Homer was awarded first place and I got second. The card hung there for the rest of the convention.

"Homer collected the prize money and was booked to work the next year at the convention. Now he had money to get a room. He took the prize money

and shared it. He was very giving in that way. All for one--

"On the way back from that convention, the van overheated and stalled in the middle of a curve in the highway, where there was no shoulder. Cars and trucks were swerving to avoid us and the engine caught fire. We put out the fire with the contents of a Coke can. We had to have the van towed. The repair took several days to complete and we stayed at my uncle's house in Kansas. Homer wasn't able to return to St. Louis and work that Monday. Upon returning to St. Louis, he found himself fired from his internship.

"His internship situation was tenuous already. Two weeks before there was the Magic Jubilee in St. Louis. He'd work a ten-hour shift, drive to the convention, which was

an hour away, stay there till six in the morning, drive straight back to work. He pulled three all-nighters in a row, all without the use of pharmaceuticals, by the way. Naturally he fell asleep at work a few times. Missing that Monday because of the Conclave a couple weeks later was the last straw."

WHO CAN SAY WHAT IS GOOD OR BAD?

Homer has instructed me to tell you that if the convention organizers would contact him, he will pay for the convention registration and buy them dinner. This also goes for the Columbus Magi Fest and Carl Andrews' convention, two other gatherings where he competed without registering - and won first place both times!

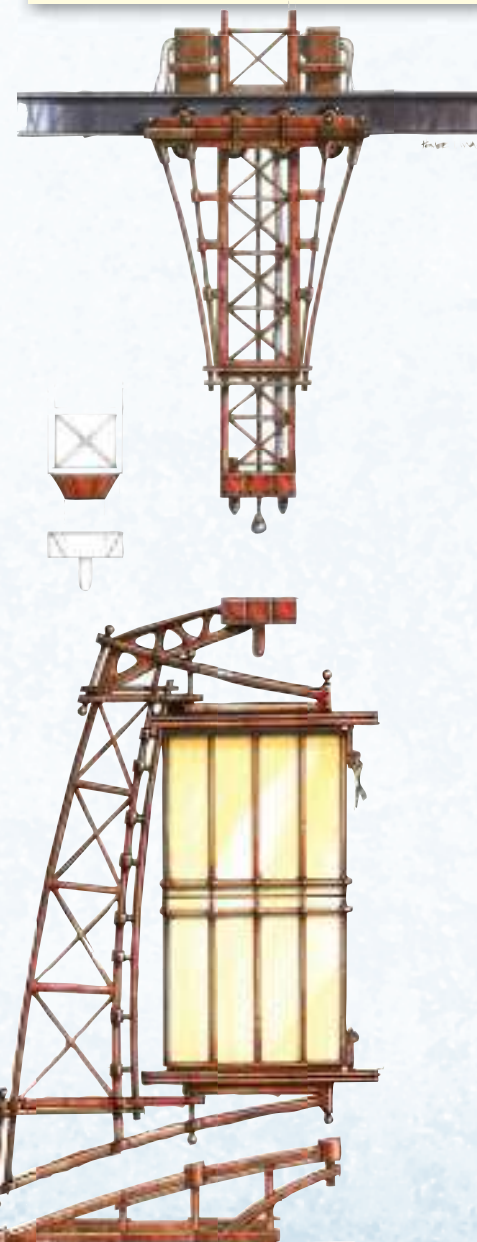
He adds, "If I hadn't gotten fired, I wouldn't have gotten my next job at a consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio, so I wouldn't have entered the contest at Carl Andrews' convention, which led to working at Illusions, and I wouldn't be working for Copperfield now."

LIWAG THE DOG

Chris is on the phone. "Homer and I are going out after the last show tonight. Why don't you come along?" Great! Some time after midnight I meet him at the stage door. I'm happy to see Aimée is there also. We hop in the car and drive over to Hamada of Japan. It's closed. We try four more restaurants. Guess what? All closed. Chris says there is a great topless place that he knows is open and that we'll all like it. No one even blinks at the mention of a topless place, and I'm certainly not going to object. When in Rome...

As we drive across town, I remember the last time I'd been to a restaurant with Homer. He and Aimée and Chris visited L.A. for one day and late that night about a dozen of us went to a diner. We ordered food, we laughed, people joked, played with cards. Jason England did more card tricks that night than I'd seen him do in the last ten years combined. Folks got up, shifted seats, moved around the table to visit with other people. Homer and Aimée sat at one end of the table, and didn't say a word to anyone else the entire night, and then picked up the check for the entire group. I wonder if they'll be as gregarious this evening, but I bring a micro-cassette recorder in case they're not.

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We arrive at the topless place, and Chris was right; it is open. We go inside, sit down, and are handed menus. *Tapas* menus. It hits me. I say, "Tapas place? I thought you said *topless* place." "Me, too," Homer yells, "Somebody better take their shirt off or I'm gonna be pissed!" This unexpected outburst surprises us, and we all laugh.

MAN OF MYSTERY

I drive back to Los Angeles, wondering what I've learned about Homer, and if it's even possible to get to know him. Chris Kenner said to me, "I know Homer better than anyone has ever known Homer, and I don't really know him. He's a very complex individual. On the surface, he wants to appear simple. He's just Homer, he likes art and magic, but he's a very complicated person."

I doubt I could have gotten him to open up. Bob Kohler told me, "He doesn't want the spotlight. He's not totally introverted or socially unaware, he just doesn't choose to steal the spotlight all the time. He says things when he has something worth saying. It's refreshing." Mike Close told me, "He's a man of mystery. He tends to hide in the shadows. But I think he's comfortable there."

That's another phrase that comes up constantly in reference to him: "He hides in the shadows." Over the years there has been debate whether he exists or not. People have actually claimed he is a fictional creation.

But if you look at Copperfield's shows and television specials, he's everywhere. In the *Unexplained Forces* special, he can be seen cleaning up the eggs that were tossed on stage. On the *Tornado of Fire* special, he can be seen sitting at a console controlling the tornado. He has had dozens of different on-stage cues in David's show, such as the slow-motion Duck Bucket. During one gag that was in the show for years, Homer secretly made a high-pitched squeal as David ran his finger around a rim of a goblet and pretended that's where the sound was coming from. "It only works with crystal," David explained, as he turned to Homer and said, "Here's Crystal." Because of that one gag, millions of people think Homer is "Crystal."

The thousands of times Chris Kenner has performed the Slumpy Show, his comedy magic act, Homer has hilariously played the part of his non-English-speaking assistant. Homer may have been hiding in the shadows all these years, but he's been hiding in plain sight.

BACK IN THE DAY

I try to find out what he was like as a performer back in the day. Mike Close tells me,



“Homer really came out of his shell at Illusions. He was quite funny when he worked. He had good presentations for his stuff and he was personable.

He has a tendency to be shy now, maybe because he isn't doing it as much performing as he used to.”

Chris Kenner says, “Back at Illusions, he wasn't that interesting as a performer. He was quiet and reserved. He did the tricks and told you what he was doing. He did twelve tricks, but they were awesome tricks; he did them flawlessly. He wasn't the zany, funny Homer. But now his personality has emerged and he is funnier.”

You got that, class? He was funny and had good presentations when he worked at Illusions, but now has a tendency to be shy. However, back at Illusions he was quiet and reserved with no presentations, but is a lot funnier now. Glad I could straighten that out for you.

DRAW YOUR OWN PICTURE OF HOMER LIWAG!



FURTHER INNER SECRETS OF DONALD KAUFMAN

Fax to: John Lovick
From: Donald Kaufman

What you have to understand about Homer is that he is a great practical joker. Copperfield says, “Homer's entire body is a tell, so he never gets me ever. He inflates his chest. I know when he's up to something.” However, many others have been his victims. For example, when he hands people their cameras, he always does the gag where he pre-

tends to drop it, but his pinky is in the loop.

He'll walk around with some bizarre object in his pocket for five days looking for the perfect opportunity to produce it to scare or amaze someone. He's always producing weird objects from people's clothes, etc. Once he was with some friends at a Chinese Buffet. A friend cracked a crab leg and it sprayed crab all over her face. Without pausing a beat, Homer said, “You've got some crab in your hair.” During this misdirection, he nonchalantly palmed a giant crab leg right off the plate in the center of the table, reached over her head, and pulled the crab leg out of her hair.

While building a giant movie screen on one of Copperfield's islands in the Bahamas, a bolt got stuck in one of the supports. No one could get it out. Homer reached down and removed it effortlessly. He then made it vanish and it reappeared back in the support. He had merely palmed a duplicate bolt, pretended to remove it, and then did a false transfer.

When the movie screen was finally erected, people were horrified to discover it had a huge tear. Of course, it was just a variation of the old torn wallpaper gag that Homer accomplished with a two-foot piece of diamond-shaped paper.

THE REAL MAN OF MYSTERY

Back in Los Angeles, it dawns on me. Were the faxes from Donald Kaufman a practical joke? Is he real? Have his phone calls and faxes been real? I spoke to him on the phone, but never actually met him. I find it odd that he communicates via fax and not email, but I'm not sure if that's significant. If “Donald Kaufman” is fictional, a practical joke, would Homer send a fax from “Donald” confessing that he liked practical jokes? It seems too risky, but maybe that's the point? If it was an elaborate ruse, then who was in on it? Chris? Homer? Both of them? Were there others?

DO YOU BELIEVE IN COINCIDENCE? ME, TOO! WHAT A COINCIDENCE.

I have several false starts with this article, so I decide to clear my mind and finish a book I'd been reading called *The 100: A Ranking of the*

Most Influential Persons in History by Michael H. Hart. The very last paragraph of the book is: “Finally, we might mention the curious fact that at least ten of the persons on this list suffered from gout, a figure enormously out of proportion to the incidence of the disease in the general population. The high frequency of gout among great men has aroused the interest of medical researchers.” At first I wonder what Donald Kaufman would make of this little tidbit. Then it occurs to me: maybe Michael H. Hart is in on the practical joke.

I pick up another book called *The Shakespeare Wars* by Ron Rosenbaum, a book about Shakespeare scholarship. In the preface, Rosenbaum mentions how few verifiable facts are known about Shakespeare's life. He then adds this parenthetical: “Look how little we know about Homer and how little it matters.” Oh my god, Rosenbaum's in on it, too.

I go for the opposite end of the literary spectrum and pull out *Pure Drivel* by Steve Martin. I open it completely randomly to page 71. It is a short essay entitled, “In Search of the Wily Filipino.” Now, it's just getting ridiculous. Somehow, they've got Steve Martin involved! I decide not to do any more reading.

BETTER

In a phone interview with Copperfield, I mention that many people say Homer is hard to get to know. I ask David if he understands Homer. He pauses and replies, “I think I do. He's a guy that wants to make things better, to use his amazing abilities to make everything he touches better than he found it. He's unsatisfied if it's not that way. In that way, I understand him. Homer has had major impact on my work. He's an important collaborator.”

Copperfield understands Homer. Well, that makes one of us. To paraphrase Mark Twain, my research has already thrown much darkness on the subject of Homer, and it is probable that if I continue I shall soon know nothing at all about him. As Ron Rosenbaum wrote, “Look how little we know about Homer and how little it matters.” Yes, look. ♦

