

SPELLBOUND

The thought of asking her had crossed my mind, but it made me nervous: it's a big thing to ask, and if she said no, it would be a little awkward. And I wouldn't want to surprise her with the question when she's stressed about something else. I concluded it would be better to ask her once I knew her better, or she might think I was being a little forward. I mean, people don't just ask people they barely know if they're magicians. Do they?

Maybe I should provide a little more context. My name is Mike Stiff. I am twenty-seven years old; I was born in Lansing, MI, and I now live in the suburbs of Chicago. And I am convinced (worried? concerned?) that my next-door neighbor may be a magician. I think this is a somewhat unusual thing to worry about one's neighbor, but maybe not. Do people often wonder whether their neighbors are magicians? And are they ever right?

A few months ago, she moved in; she went around and met everyone on the block, but hasn't really interacted much with us since. Her name is Rachel Papier (is that a magician's name? No more so than mine, I guess). She's tall and brown-haired, and dresses like it's ten degrees cooler than it actually is. Like me, she came to this suburb of formulaic houses and green lawns for work. She keeps reasonable hours for the most part, and she's a quiet neighbor.

That was that for the first few weeks. But something interesting happened one day when I got back from work very late. Before opening my front door and going to sleep, I decided to look around. Crickets chirped, somewhere far off, but it was otherwise silent. The half moon and some stars were in the sky, though I couldn't tell you which constellations were up there. And the houses' windows were mostly darkened, since it was sleep time for normal people. But her kitchen light was on. I wondered why she was up so late, but almost before I could process it, the window flashed greenish-yellow purple seven times, and I heard seven soft *pop* noises. I wondered, was so tired I was imagining things? But then it happened again: one more flash, the same color, and the same *pop*. I didn't think I made that up.

But it could have been anything, right? Maybe she was doing artistic flash photography, maybe making industrial-strength Pop Rocks. But I right away wondered if she was a magician. I'm not actually sure why. I think I read about a spell like that in a book once. That must have been it.

Anyways, that was one incident, when it was tired and I was late. The thought had crossed my mind, and I laughed when I remembered the next morning. My neighbor, a magician? Nuh-uh.

Two days later Rachel knocked on my door while I was having breakfast. I didn't expect the four sharp raps at my door — I jumped up from my oatmeal and nearly spilled it on my work clothes. I was wondering what she would think of her frazzled, half-awake neighbor, but as I opened the door I saw she also looked like she wanted to do nothing more than drag the clouds in front of the sun, like curtains, so she could go back to her nap.

"Hey, I'm sorry to bother you about this," she said, "but I've come down sick and I'm trying to make myself some. . . soup. If you have a few ingredients it would save me a trip to the store."

"Yeah, sure!"

"Ah, thank you. Do you have any buttonnose mushrooms, quail eggs, basil, or sea salt?"

"Quail eggs? I can get everything but that," I replied.

"Yeah, apparently they're crucial for the remedy to work."

"Huh. Okay, I'll be back in a sec." What on Earth is she making?

I returned with the rather unusual ingredients, and she said, "wow, thanks so much! But I forgot one thing. You wouldn't have any woodwort. . . no? Forget I asked. Have a good day!"

What a strange shopping list. . . it wasn't until a few minutes later that I realized they sounded like the ingredients for some sort of magic potion. Maybe that hunch was right, and she really did have magic powers, and was trying to cure her cold with them. It was a silly thing to wonder, here in suburbia, but twice in a single week meant I couldn't laugh it off as easily. If a magician moved into my neighborhood, someone would have told me about it, right?

Is she a magician?

I was genuinely curious, but in the meantime I had other things to attend to. I was running late to work, first of all, and I needed to let my boss know. I pulled my Firebird out of my pocket to send him a message.

Of all the things in my household, the Firebird would probably have been the most confusing to my ten-year-old self. It's a '10 model, a few years older, but I can do just about anything with it: communicate with friends and colleagues anywhere in the world, entertain myself for hours, and sometimes do all of a day's work with it. It even comes with a built-in spell checker.

That morning, I was running short on time, so I used it to dictate a message to my boss. It lit up and beeped as I tried to focus my thoughts away from my neighbor and towards my job.

"New message to Benjamin Sung." It beeped in confirmation. "Hi Ben comma I'm going to be a little late today period. I'll be there for the ten o'clock meeting for the Pegasus project period. Are you still up for lunch at The Sad Dragon afterwards question mark. Thanks comma Mike. Send."

With that, I packed up my bag and was out the door. It was a bright summer day: I was greeted with blue sky and green grass lawns, and a wisp of pink smoke coming from Rachel's chimney.

Wait, what?

The next few weeks, I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, yet my mind kept returning to the question. Is she a magician? Well, how would I find out? I can't just go and ask her — what if I ask her and she's not a magician? That would be awkward. She'd look at me as if I'm some kind of weirdo. And she'd be right.

But at the same time, I still wondered. I revisited those little memories over again, looking for mundane explanations, and, I mean, you can explain them without magic, but I just didn't find it convincing. I needed more information. Well, okay, I suppose I wanted more information.

Asking her was off the table, which meant trying to see if she did anything else that was weird. It would not be easy: she isn't going to want to reveal herself to her nonmagical neighbors. Wait, I mean she wouldn't want to, if she were a magician. Is she, though?

Or maybe I could ask our other neighbors, but I don't really know them well enough to gossip, and certainly it would make me look suspicious too. Besides, they might be weirded out if they heard, "yeah, so I think Rachel is magical. What do you think?"

In the meantime, I was spending a little too much time thinking about it. What does it even matter if she's magical? Well, it would be really cool. But there are lots of other cool things in the world, and it's my job to wrangle some of them. The Pegasus project was coming due, and I had to work late for a few weeks. I tried to put Rachel out of my mind for the time being.

That was a month ago, and I totally failed. I kept wondering, even as working on the Pegasus project made everything fly by. It didn't help that there were still weird things going on. One Sunday, all of her grass was mowed, but I didn't hear a lawnmower that morning. Did she cut it by hand? I didn't believe it. Another time, her cat got loose, and ended up at my door (did it know something about me?). It was a black cat, with green eyes: cute, I suppose, but its owner was a lot cuter. I got it some milk and called Rachel, and while I was on the phone, the cat looked up from the bowl and made eye contact, and I swear I heard it say "thanks." Or maybe it sneezed. I couldn't tell, and I knew which I wanted to believe. I really needed to get out of my own head. Rachel stopped by a little later, but I couldn't bring myself to ask her about it; I guess the cat got my tongue.

And most strangely of all, I was on the way out to work one morning and discovered that her house was, all of a sudden, painted blue! There were also white trimmings, and the door was a delightful shade of cerulean. But that's not important right now; how did she do that in just one night? Was she out painting until the sun rose? And there didn't seem to be any dripping paint. I wondered if I was imagining things, losing my grip on sanity, but when I took a picture of her cat with my Firebird, her house had been in the background, and it was definitely gray. Curiouser and curiouser.

I kept agonizing over whether to say something — I really didn't want to bring it up with her, but I really wanted to know. One afternoon, I saw her out on a run and I almost went to say hi and possibly bring the subject up (how do you even say it?), but before I could, she turned into a side street and sped off.

It's a typical Saturday at home, and I'm making myself lunch, and I still don't know. We're done with the Pegasus project (and gave a truly enchanting project presentation), so I have more time to let my mind wander, and it always seems to come back to her. There are so many ways to think about it: if she's a magician, where does she work? She didn't tell any of us what exactly her job is, and I can't really see her fitting in at my office. What does she do in her free time? I guess she has magical hobbies, because I keep accidentally seeing the results. Wait, I mean she would have magical hobbies. I can't just casually assume my neighbor has supernatural powers. Except that's what I've been doing for the past month.

I need to get the answer, maybe not even for its own sake, but so that I stop wondering. I'm not going to convince myself either way by just waiting, and it's going to tear me up. This is it: I'll have to ask her. Maybe she will think I'm crazy, but if I let this go on much longer, I'll definitely drive myself mad.

Right now, maybe I should focus on my lunch. But as I spread mustard on my sandwich, I hear the *vroom* of the mail truck go by. The mail. Of course! I've run into her at our mailboxes before, and it's pretty likely that she'll pick it up sometime in the next 20 minutes. I throw down my sandwich, summon my inner strength and my flip-flops, and stride out the door. Mustard can wait; this is action.

As I walk outside, I find myself looking everywhere except the mailboxes. It's the kind of summer day where nothing really happens, with the beautiful blue cloudless sky set against the baking asphalt. Nobody's out in the street, and even the air is heavy with heat, feeling as lazy as the rest of us.

It turns out I don't have to wait — Rachel is coming to get her mail, too. It'll be easy enough to wait for her and ask. Maybe she will be surprised, maybe she will be alarmed. But I'm not going back now.

As she gets closer, I think I can see three red sparks buzzing around her wrist like a bracelet
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She waved hello. "Hey. How have you been?"

"Oh, you know. Same old, same old. How are you? How's your cat?"

"He doesn't like the heat much, but otherwise we're both doing well."

"That's good to hear. Say, I have a question to ask you. . . " This is it. "Are you a magician, too?"

She pauses for one of those seconds that lasts hours, and then says, "Yes, I am! Wait, and you're one as well? What kind of wand do you have?"

"It's an older one, a '10 Firebird. Comes with a built-in spell checker."

"No way! Me too!" And sure enough, she pulls an identical-looking wand out of her purse.

"Whoa, that's cool," I said.

"Tell me about it! I had no idea you were a magician this whole time."

"I mean, it's not something you tell your neighbors, right?"

"Fair enough. But then how did you know that I was one?"

"Well, that's a little bit of a long story. I can explain it to you over lunch if you want — I'm making sandwiches, and you're welcome to join me."

"Sure, I'll stop by for a spell."