

A Magician's Search for Wonder
in the Modern World

HERE
IS
REAL
MAGIC

Nate Staniforth

“Vivid, deeply compelling, and startlingly personal.” —**LEV GROSSMAN**

AMERICAN SWOON

Here Is Real Magic

*A Magician's Search for Wonder
in the Modern World*

Nate Staniforth

B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury USA
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2018

© Nate Staniforth 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

Author's note: To write this book I drew upon my journal from India, my own memory of the events and places, and Andy's extensive video footage from our trip. Much of the dialog in the second half of the book comes directly from those transcripts, though in some instances I had to reconstruct dialog when no record of the conversation existed. In those cases I have attempted to consult those involved to ensure the conversation has been represented accurately. Some of the names in this book have been changed to preserve anonymity.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-63286-424-6
ePub: 978-1-63286-426-0

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Staniforth, Nate, author.

Title: Here is real magic / Nate Staniforth.

Description: New York: Bloomsbury, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017016409 | ISBN 9781632864246 (hardcover: acid-free paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Staniforth, Nate. | Magicians—United States—Biography.

Classification: LCC GV1545.S77 A3 2018 | DDC 793.8092 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017016409>

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in the U.S.A. by Berryville Graphics Inc., Berryville, Virginia

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com. Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

Bloomsbury books may be purchased for business or promotional use. For information on bulk purchases please contact Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at specialmarkets@macmillan.com.

To the Magicians

Above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world
around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden
in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in
magic will never find it.

—*Roald Dahl*

CONTENTS

Introduction	I
--------------	---

PART ONE

Alchemy	11
Heroes	24
How to Be a Starving Artist	37
Tour	48
Fake	58
How to Light Yourself on Fire	70
The Break	80

PART TWO

How to Disappear	97
Kolkata	105
The Train to Varanasi	117
The Snake Charmer	129

Godmen	144
<i>Choomantar</i>	161
Go North	173
Now We Put the River to Sleep	187
The Poet	198
The Street Magicians of Shadipur Depot	205
The Train to Jodhpur	222
Here Is Real Magic	234
Acknowledgments	243

INTRODUCTION

I'M TWO WEEKS into a three-month tour and tonight I'm at a college in Chicago, performing a show at an on-campus bar in the basement of the student union. Three hundred people are packed into a space that should hold only half that many. The room is dark and noisy. The audience is on its way to being drunk—even very drunk—and while this may not be the worst performance environment I have ever faced, it's close.

In a gamble to take charge of the situation I've abandoned the small pipe-and-drape platform in the corner and now I'm standing on a table in the middle of the room. Every audience is different. Sometimes you have to charm them or cajole them, sometimes you have to entice or fascinate, and sometimes you have to roll up your sleeves and fight, winning the room with a careful blend of intensity and goodwill, convincing the audience that you're either a genius or a madman and that, either way, they should probably stop for a second and listen. Tonight my arrival onstage was met with a mixture of applause and disdain, the audience being equal parts people who came to see a magic show and people who came to drink. One six-foot, two-hundred-fifty-pound bruiser with a crew cut started booing

even before they finished reading my introduction. Now I am standing on his table.

Except it's not really me up there. The version of me who's capable of climbing up in front of a few hundred people and commanding the room is tougher and smarter than I am. He is wild and unpredictable. He's faster on his feet and capable of making bold, intuitive leaps that I could never make in the real world, and he can stick the landing, too. He's also kind of an asshole. He cares far more about the show than he does the sensibilities of the audience, and his priorities can get me into trouble.

"Listen," I say, scanning the room, deliberately meeting the eyes of everyone who booed just a minute ago, "in a minute, you are going to see something impossible. Some of you are going to scream. Some of you are going to yell. This gentleman here is going to shit himself." Crew Cut is looking at me like he wants to fight, but I have him pinned in his seat with the gaze of three hundred people who are finally paying attention. For the moment he can only glower.

"I'm not doing this for the money. I'm not doing this for the glory. If I were, I sure as hell wouldn't be here. I'm here because I've spent my entire life learning to do something incredible, and tonight I'm going to share it with you. When I'm done, you can clap, you can boo, you can stay, you can leave—I don't give a shit."

This succeeds in shocking them. I've pushed the audience about as far as they will go and I can feel their attention wavering between fascination and offense. Now the entire room has turned to watch. Whether this is because they're interested in seeing what I'm about to do or because they think I'm about

to get the shit kicked out of me doesn't matter. For the moment, I have them.

"I'm going to give this gentleman my wallet. He probably hates me right now, so I understand this might seem dangerous, but I'm choosing him because he's the biggest one in the bar, and I need someone to keep the wallet safe." I'm edging back the hostility now. At some point I need these people to like me, so now that I have their attention I'm dialing down the aggression.

I look down at Crew Cut. "What's your name?"

He looks at me like he wishes he'd gone somewhere else for the evening.

"Marcus."

I hand him my wallet. "Marcus, I want you to put this on the table and put both hands on top of it. Don't open it yet. But make sure that no one else opens it either. Got it?"

Marcus nods. I've put him on the spot but I'm about to make it up to him. I know that if this works he will remember this experience for the rest of his life. He will tell his children about this moment. I've spent six years developing this illusion and it's been worth the effort. If I had five minutes to justify my entire existence as a magician, this is what I would perform. Given my strained relationship with tonight's audience, five minutes might be all I have left.

I turn to the rest of the room.

"I'm going to need six random people to help. If I just asked for volunteers you might think that I had confederates in the audience, so I'm going to take this gentleman's hat"—and here I reach down and snatch a baseball cap from someone's head—"and throw it out into the room. If you catch it, stand up. We'll do that six times."

Thirty seconds later six people are standing and the man has his hat back.

“I need each of you to think of a number between one and fifty. When I point to you, call your number out loud so everyone can hear.”

“Sixteen.”

“Thirty-two.”

“Nine.”

“Forty-three.”

“Eleven.”

I pause before the last person. A girl is standing in the back of the room, holding a beer in one hand. I don't think she came here intending to watch a magic show, but she started paying attention as soon as I climbed onto the table, and when the hat flew toward her a minute ago she jumped up to catch it.

“What's your name?”

“Jessica.”

“Jessica, before you tell me your number I just want to say this: When you go home tonight, you are going to be unable to sleep. You're going to lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, driving yourself crazy wondering what would have happened if you had named a number other than the number you are about to name.”

The audience laughs. Jessica just listens.

“Before you give me your number, I want you to know in your heart of hearts that it was a free choice, that there is no way I could have gotten inside your head to make you give me the number I wanted. Right?”

She nods slowly.

“What number are you thinking of?”

“Fourteen.”

Silence here. Every great illusion has a moment of calm before the build to the end, and right now the room is completely quiet. At some point in the last minute the bartender started watching and turned off the music. Everyone is still.

“Some of you are going to think of this as a trick, and that’s fine. I’m a magician, and magicians do tricks. But we can all agree that up to this point there is no way I could have controlled which of you were going to catch the baseball hat or what numbers you would say.”

The six people nod.

“Some of you are going to think of this as a coincidence, but I want to point out that the odds of this working by chance alone are in the trillions. What are the numbers again? Sixteen, thirty-two, nine, forty-three, eleven, and fourteen, right? Look at this.”

Marcus has been sitting at the table the entire time, holding the wallet and watching the performance. I point to the wallet.

“Marcus, could you stand up for a second?”

He stands. I ask him to hold the wallet up above his head so everyone can see, and he does.

“You have been holding my wallet the entire time. Open it and look inside. You should find a lottery ticket. Take it out.”

Marcus opens the wallet and removes the lottery ticket.

“This isn’t a winning lottery ticket. I’m not a millionaire. But I want you to look at the numbers on the lottery ticket. I’m going to hand you the microphone. Read them out loud.”

I am watching his face now, waiting for him to see it.

There.

“Oh,” he says quietly. “Oh shit. Oh no.” He looks at me. His eyes are very wide. He looks back at the lottery ticket. “Oh shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.”

He has been holding the microphone. Everyone else is straining for a view of whatever it is that he’s seeing, but they can hear him clearly.

“Oh holy shit. No fucking way. Get the fuck out of here, man. What the fuck?” The audience is watching Marcus ascend to a sort of crazed delirium.

“Read them the numbers printed on the ticket, Marcus.”

Marcus raises the microphone. “Sixteen, thirty-two, nine, forty-three, eleven, and fourteen.”

The room explodes. I don’t know how else to say it. One moment three hundred people are leaning forward in a dead quiet, straining to understand what’s happened. Then Marcus reads the numbers and panic surges through the room as if a fire is breaking out. People are on their feet, screaming and jumping and turning to one another. Some are laughing. Someone runs for the exit, knocking over a table. Jessica has her hands on her face, her mouth open. Marcus has dropped the microphone. He is reading the ticket over and over again, shaking his head and laughing.

I want you to see his face. I want you to see the joy, the open, unaffected joy. It’s the kind of joy that reminds you that what you mistook for dull, uninspired brutishness a moment before was actually just weight—the weight of worry, of pain, of anxiety, of the world—and for a moment it has gone, and the face that shines without it is extraordinary. Magicians get to see

people at their very best, and in this transformation you can see actual magic through the illusion.

As if on cue, the bartender restarts the music. I have been onstage for five minutes. I don't remember what happens for the rest of the show and it doesn't matter. For the moment I'm filled with adrenaline and warm from victory. I am wide awake. Tomorrow I'll leave early and travel all day so I can do it all over again in another town for another audience, but right now my thoughts are here in this room, and the room before that, and the hundreds and hundreds of theaters, auditoriums, and ballrooms before that, all the way back to my first performance. I was nine years old. I made a coin vanish on the playground, the entire world went crazy, and I learned that you can say something with a magic trick that is hard to say any other way.

PART ONE

ALCHEMY

SOMEWHERE IN MY parents' house there's a picture of me at age seven. I'm crouched in the grass in the backyard on a summer evening, surrounded by fireflies, lifting my cupped hands as if I'm holding a secret and want to share it. At that age it's easy to be amazed. The world is new and you are new in it and free from the ridiculous certainty that comes so easily with age that the inner workings of the universe are not only knowable but already known.

My first interest in magic came long before I became a magician, and though I have gone on to perform my show thousands of times for hundreds of thousands of people, to this day when I think about magic I think about two memories from a time before I knew anything about tricks.

The first was when I lay on the floor under the piano when my dad played before bedtime. During the day he worked as a dentist, but we rarely saw him at the office. We saw him when he came home and painted in the basement or paced the backyard with a yellow legal pad writing terse, fiery letters to the editor of the local paper about public policy and the environment. He'd read them to us at dinner and my mom would

invariably protest—“Art! You can’t say that in public!”—and my younger brother and I would laugh in delight at her exasperation. But in the evenings he would turn out the lights and sit at the piano and I would lie underneath, listening. The only light in the room came from the lamp for the sheet music—Beethoven, Bach, Rachmaninoff. The music filled the house but from underneath I could hear the mechanics of the piano, too—the faint creak of the pedals, the click of the keys, the felted hammers striking the strings, the deep resonance of the sounding board. You could get lost in those sounds.

From the most expensive concert grand to the cheapest church basement clunker, a piano is essentially a wooden box stretched with wire. It’s a cumbersome piece of furniture. And as I listened all those nights before bed, I realized that the majesty and the mystery of the piano is that this heavy, ungainly apparatus can give birth to the *Moonlight Sonata*. That you can coax from this box of wood and wire a sound so light and pure and beautiful, that anything so firmly rooted in the physical could call into being something that borders so closely on the transcendent: this—lying on the floor underneath my dad’s piano—was the first time I really noticed the experience of magic.

The second came maybe a year or so later. One night my mom came upstairs to wake me and my younger brother. It felt like midnight but it was probably only nine or ten. She held my sleeping baby sister and asked us to come downstairs. Dad had already started the car and put blankets on the back bench seat and we set out into the night, on an adventure, they said.

We lived in Ames, Iowa—a small liberal college town surrounded by endless stretches of corn and soybean fields—and fifteen minutes out of town on the two-lane highway we

were beyond the reach of the city's light and enveloped in total darkness. The entire world was reduced to the faint illumination of the dashboard and a short smudge of yellow from the headlights on the road ahead. We pulled off the highway onto a gravel road. Dad turned off the engine and we all got out.

On either side of the road the corn rose above my head and the warm summer wind breathed quietly through the stalks. I stood there, expectant, I imagine, and uncertain why we had come. And then I looked up.

This was not the sky. I had seen the sky—I knew how the sky looked at night, and this was some different thing entirely. The comforting veil of faint stars that mildly wrapped every other night had been replaced by a void of terrible space and time and distance, stretching infinitely up and infinitely away, forever. There was Mars. There was the Milky Way. There was the universe in all of its awful, overpowering majesty towering above us, inexplicably high and distant, hostile and beckoning, dangerous and wild, a haunted place where we were the only ghosts for miles.

Then the meteor shower began. My dad led us up a low hill and laid the blankets on the wet grass. I don't remember how long we all lay there, watching the sky, but I became aware for the first time that the entire planet—the oceans, London, Mount Everest, everything—lay directly and totally behind me. Somehow the night sky had unveiled the true nature of this road, mistaken during the day as a gravel route through a cornfield but revealed now as the final patch of earth at the very edge of the world. That night the mystery of our situation felt like one grand miracle, hidden just out of sight unless you really try to see it. That there is something rather than nothing,

and that we are here to be part of it—surely this is amazing. How is this so easy to forget? How is this so easy to ignore, silence, or overlook in the pursuit of other things? Even at a young age we learn the universe is filled with loneliness and fear, but lying there, clinging to the blanket as the earth spun and the meteors fell and the whole of existence stood out on display, I recognized that whatever else it was and whatever I became in it, the universe was also filled—to the very cusp—with wonder.

Now, decades later, I worry that the experience of wonder becomes harder and harder for me to find as I get older. This has nothing to do with education—wonder is not the product of ignorance—but it does have something to do with certainty. As an adult, I am tempted to establish and reaffirm at all times the boundaries of my existence—to say “This is my life and I have a good grip on it,” like an ostrich in his own personal kingdom under the sand. But my favorite moments are the ones that shoot this certainty full of holes, that barge in unannounced and track mud all over the carpets, grab me by the shirt, drag me out into the street and say, in effect, “Wake up, you fool, and open your eyes. There is more to it than that.”

So if I were to tell you about my experience as a human being I wouldn't tell you about my triumphs or my defeats. Everyone has them, and they're more the result of life than the actual stuff of its creation. I wouldn't tell you about my fears or my suffering. Again, everyone has them, and mine are not particularly unique or acute. All things considered, so far I have been pretty lucky.

Instead, I would tell you about the moments I have stood rapt in awe, or quiet with wonder, and in so doing, seen beyond the surface of things. I have spent most of my life and all of my career trying to understand this experience, yet it has never

become commonplace or ordinary. On the contrary, it stands out as one of the only experiences in this world that is wholly good. Wonder, astonishment, magic—that sense of waking up and seeing things the way you saw them before they became ordinary. This is the root of it for me, the curious joy and the primal dread of the unknown. There’s something there—in the dark sky at night or in the bare branches of the trees against the gray November clouds, or in the summer wind as it comes in from the sea with the smell of another land just over the horizon—reminding us that the universe, the world, and the human heart are larger and more mysterious than we can possibly imagine. This is magic.

So this—all of this—came first. The magic tricks came later, and the less we dwell on them, the better. This is not a book about tricks. This is a book about magic—the experience of magic—and you can find it anywhere. People find it in music and movies, in mountaintops or conversation, in the night sky or in the *Moonlight Sonata*. Magic tricks are just a way to remember something you already know, or maybe knew and then forgot somewhere along the way. Take them for what they are and they’re nothing. You can’t look at them. You have to look through them, like a telescope.



I BECAME A magician by accident.

When I was nine years old I learned how to make a coin disappear. I’d read *The Lord of the Rings* and ventured into the adult section of the library to search for a book of spells—nine being that curious age at which you’re old enough to work through thirteen hundred pages of arcane fantasy literature but

young enough to still hold out hope that you might find a book of real, actual magic in the library. The book I found instead taught basic sleight of hand technique, and I dedicated the next months to practice.

At first the magic wasn't any good. At first it wasn't even magic, it was just a trick, and at first it was just a bad trick. I spent hours of each day in the bathroom, running through the secret moves in front of the mirror above the sink and getting lost in the possibility that if I became good enough I could make the coin disappear. I dropped the coin over and over, a thousand times in a day, and after two weeks of this my mom got a carpet sample from the hardware store and placed it under the mirror to muffle the sound of the coin falling again and again to the floor. I had heard my dad work through passages of new music on the piano, so I knew how to practice—slowly, deliberately, going for precision rather than speed—and one day I tried the illusion in the mirror and the coin vanished. It did not look like a magic trick. It looked like a miracle.

One of the lessons you learn very early on as a magician is that the most amazing part of a magic trick has nothing to do with the secret. The secret is simple and often dull: a hidden piece of tape, a small mirror, a duplicate playing card. In this case the secret was a series of covert maneuvers to hide the coin behind my hand in the act of opening it, a dance of the fingers that I learned so completely I didn't even have to think. I would close my hand, open it, and the coin would vanish not by skill but by real magic.

One day I made the coin vanish on the playground. We had been playing football and were standing by the backstop in the

field behind the school. A dozen people were watching. I showed the coin to everyone. Then it disappeared.

Imagine for a moment that you are at school. You see someone holding a quarter. Then, without warning or context, the quarter disappears. Or imagine that you see anything that would qualify as impossible. A man walks through a wall. A garbage can levitates. The pages in your hand turn into a pigeon and fly away. This would not be a small experience. It would, in fact, be one of the defining moments of your life. Your instinct would not be to applaud or laugh or turn jovially to the person next to you on the train and offer an explanation as to how your book could have disappeared. It would not feel like a piece of entertainment—it would feel like a car crash or an explosion, or a violation of the laws of nature and a direct, crippling assault on your fundamental sense of certainty about the ways of the world. The appropriate response to something that feels truly impossible is not applause: the appropriate response is fear; fear and, as you are running away, some hidden, pure, secret joy that maybe the world is bigger than you thought.

In any case, they screamed. They yelled, laughed, scrambled away. Everyone went crazy. This was great. This was Bilbo Baggins from *The Lord of the Rings* terrifying the guests at his birthday party by putting the One Ring on his finger and just vanishing in front of everyone.

The teacher on duty crossed the playground to investigate. Mrs. Tanner was a wiry, vengeful woman who dominated her classroom with an appetite for humiliation and an oversized plastic golf club she wielded like a weapon, slamming it down on the desks of the unruly and uncommitted. Once she swung

it directly at Aaron Gray, stopping the head of the club just a few inches from his face, which dissolved immediately into a crumpled mess of tears and shrieking, sobbing fear. Aaron Grey was a bastard, to be sure, but Mrs. Tanner was worse.

She marched toward me and demanded to know what was going on. The coin vanished for her, too. She stopped. “Do it again,” she said, and I did. I’m sure my hands were shaking, but when I looked up everything had changed. This was someone else entirely. It’s possible that Mrs. Tanner didn’t jump up and down and scream with quite as much volume as the third graders, but I will remember the look on her face—the look of wide-eyed, open-mouthed wonder—forever.

Two certainties. First, this was clearly the greatest thing in the world. I had never seen anyone react to anything the way my teacher had responded when the coin disappeared. I kept seeing her face—the stern, authoritarian façade melting into shock, fear, elation, and joy, all at once. The kids, too. The same new kids at the same new school had been transformed for a moment from a vaguely indifferent, vaguely hostile pack of scavengers and carnivores into real people. If you could make people feel like this, why wouldn’t you do it all the time? Why didn’t everyone do this? For anyone—but especially for a nine-year-old boy at a new school—this transformation is almost indistinguishable from real magic.

The second certainty was harder to reconcile. I had uncovered a mystery. The more I thought about it, the stranger it became, and even now it intrigues me as much as it did that day on the playground.

Here it is: all of it—the chaos, the shouting, the wide-eyed wonder—all of this came from a coin trick. As amazing as it

was for my audience, the moment was far more amazing for me. I knew that it was just a trick and I was just a kid. But the reactions of the students and the teacher were so much greater than the sum of these modest parts that I didn't know how to explain them. I was back under the piano again, hearing the creaking and straining of the instrument bringing out a sound that was maybe from that piece of furniture but certainly not of it. The weight of this disparity is hard to overemphasize. Something incredible had happened that day on the playground. I might have caused it, but it had not come from me. I had inadvertently tapped into something visceral and wild. I could still see the teacher's face. I could still hear the shouts of fear, astonishment, and joy. The joy was the hardest to explain. Surprise comes easy, but joy never does. I was an alchemist who had somehow—unknowingly, unintentionally—discovered how to turn lead into gold.

Even a nine-year-old knows this is impossible. You could only do that with real magic.



I BECAME A magician because I loved the experience of awe and wonder. Also because I thought a good magic trick might impress girls, frighten bullies, stupefy adults, and generally lead to a life of mystery and adventure. When the coin vanished on the playground I felt as if I had found a secret path into another world and I wanted to see where it led.

The Ames Public Library was my only real link to the world of magic, and there I uncovered the secret architecture of deception invented by magicians to create marvels. I learned everything I could find: technique, theory, sleight of hand,

misdirection. Of the many misconceptions the general public holds about the world of magicians, the belief that we are particularly good at keeping secrets is the most baffling. Even a modestly funded public library contains entire lifetimes of material—how to find a chosen card, how to pick a lock, how to levitate a dollar bill, and on and on—and for a child these discoveries do not feel like magic tricks. They feel like a hidden map to buried treasure or a letter that falls down your chimney on your eleventh birthday that says *Dear Harry, you are a wizard*. Here in these books of magic the impossible became possible and the world of fiction was suddenly and unexpectedly made real.

From the beginning I could see that behind the deceptions in each of the magic tricks lurked something very real—larger, but harder to see. Even though the tricks were ostensibly “fake,” the experience of the audience was genuine, palpable, and more than a little unsettling. The young magician discovers the disarming ease with which a good piece of magic can open a window to something raw and untamed within the human spirit that is usually kept private and shielded from the public view.

I remember doing magic for a friend of my parents one afternoon—a burly, gregarious man from Chicago who liked to slap you on the back and grinned as though everything was an inside joke. He started watching politely, face frozen in that vanilla-frosting smile adults reserve for children when they want to communicate just how completely they are paying attention, but then the magic happened and all of that dropped away. “Holy shit!” he shrieked. “Holy shit! Art, did you see that?” He looked at my dad, and then down at me again, his face a rapture of unbridled joy and incredulity. “Holy shit!”

What strange current passes through the mind of a grown man as he jumps up and down in the kitchen shouting “Holy shit!” at a ten-year-old boy whose magic trick requires nothing more than a duplicate playing card and a piece of double-sided tape? Certainly this was a clue to something essential. You can only see so many grown, sober, educated adults jumping up and out of themselves with amazement before you begin to suspect that the magician is tapping into something primal, even universal, that goes far deeper than anything gained or lost through age and experience. Everyone assumes that magic is best appreciated by children, but any magician in the world will tell you that while you might be hired at the birthday party to entertain the kids, it’s the adults watching from the back of the room who react with the most depth and emotion.



A YEAR OR so later, David Copperfield—the most famous magician in the world—brought his international tour to Ames, Iowa, and my fate was sealed. I still remember coming home from school with my brother one day that fall. The house felt different. My mom appeared, smiling in the doorway, and before we even dropped our backpacks to the floor she said, “Do you know what I did today?” Clearly, it was something wonderful. “Do you know who is coming to town? David Copperfield is performing at C. Y. Stephens Auditorium and we’re all going to go. I got tickets today and we’re in the third row.”

She dropped to her knee and handed me a newspaper clipping showing a man standing astride a motorcycle on a stage filled with light and smoke. DAVID COPPERFIELD—BEYOND IMAGINATION—LIVE ON STAGE.

I knew about David Copperfield somehow, though at this point I had still never actually seen a magician. Ames doesn't get a lot of magic shows, and I hadn't seen any of the TV specials, so my only knowledge about how it should look came from books. And now the biggest magic show on the planet was coming to a theater just down the road.

The night of the show I'd insisted that we arrive at the theater early to make sure we had plenty of time to be excited in our seats before the show began. My brother and I had dressed up for the occasion—one of the two or three times in my entire childhood that I wasn't wearing sweatpants—and my parents parked the car and walked us toward the towering, monolithic C. Y. Stephens Auditorium. It rose from the parking lot like a mountain, the tallest building in town. A line stretched around the theater and in the back we saw three semi trucks with COPPERFIELD spelled out along the side. All day at school we had been talking about the show. Apparently that Sunday the youth pastor at one of the churches in town had condemned magic as the work of the devil, infusing my fourth-grade classroom with controversy, and someone at my dad's office who had seen the show in Chicago a month before wasn't allowing her children to go because she feared the magic would frighten them. My parents thought we could handle it, but before the show they talked to my brother and me about everything we would see—specifically, that these were illusions performed by a magician and we didn't need to worry. I clutched my ticket and handed it to the man at the door. Then we went in.

As we found our seats, I looked around the room. It was full, and, surprisingly, full of adults. My brother and I were maybe the youngest ones there. This was not children's night at the

theater. The sound system blasted something modern and loud and smoke filled the darkened stage and billowed out into the cavernous hall, catching the overhead houselights and transforming this auditorium into someplace strange and vaguely ominous. The room crackled, as if a spark would set off the whole thing. Even before the start of the show this was the greatest night of my life. I was ten years old and living in the middle of the cornfields, and the most famous magician in the world was about to walk out onto that stage and blow the whole city away.

I don't remember the show. The specifics don't matter. Amazing things happened and at the end we all stood and clapped for a long, long time. At some point during the performance I remember looking over at my parents. They looked like children. These were no longer adults. Whatever time and age had put upon them was gone. I had never seen my dad smile like that before, like a kid at a magic show.

When the applause finally ended I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay in my seat. I wanted to live there and feel that way again and again. If you could use your life to give people the experience we'd just had at the show, why would you do anything else? Children can want something with more keening power than anyone, and in this moment—and all of the ones that followed—I wanted to do magic above all else. Take everything else but leave me this. I will give anything.

Pre-order your copy of
HERE IS REAL MAGIC
by Nate Staniforth today!

Available from Amazon, Barnes &
Noble, and your local independent
bookseller:

<http://smarturl.it/HereIsRealMagic>

For more information:
www.natestaniforth.com