

When the boy's magic show took place in the otherwise forgettable year of 2034, the Rialto had long since been designated a heritage property and turned into a venue for hire. No one suspected the art-deco movie palace, once a gem of the Roaring Twenties, would ever again know glory of any kind. The theater now hosted amateur plays and charity entertainments, as well as weddings and bar-mitzvahs. History-making magic shows? Not so much.

The Rialto's last memorable moment had come a century earlier with the city's premiere of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. A blow-up of Jimmy Stewart, arguably America's most loved avatar, still loomed over the main entrance. In the lobby the original blue-veined white marble was proving its durability, and a museum-grade glass enclosure boasted a teak popcorn cart from the days of Teddy Roosevelt.

Two factors explain why the Rialto was nearly empty for the young magician's performance. The tremendous snowstorm on the day of the event certainly kept people away. Adding to the drawback of the weather was the reputation of the boy. He had no reputation. He was a complete unknown. He had never auditioned anywhere or even appeared in a school talent show.

The only advertisements for the show were home-made posters on nearby construction hoardings. They promised *Connections and Astoundments*. Alongside the pledge of uncommon hocus-pocus was a portrait of the young magician. The somber pencil sketch showed a boy with a shock of black hair and big eyes to match, emerging from what some saw as a cocoon and others as a dense swirl of fog. First impressions of the poster were additionally disconcerting because the magician was clearly a freshly minted teenager, his baby-face not long outgrown.

On the day of the show this digital summons orbited the theater's marquee: TONIGHT AT 8:00 P.M. ... A MAGICIAN LIKE NO OTHER ... YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE YOUR EYES . . . YOU WILL SEE THINGS FALL UP! . . .

.....

2034: The flamboyant summons on the Rialto's marquee was written by the owner of the theater, Nathan Goldstein. He usually left the wording to his assistant, Amelia, but in this instance he felt like communicating a certain excitement – his own. Of course one of his goals was to sell as many tickets as possible, but another was to share his admiration for the boy. Meeting him, then watching him demonstrate his talent, had left Goldstein more than impressed. He was inspired. This was a sensation he had rarely experienced in life.

Three weeks earlier, on a quiet Tuesday morning, Amelia had poked her head into Goldstein's office to announce an unexpected visitor.

“Nat, there's a young man here who would like to see you.”

Goldstein looked up from his *cDawn*. “Is he in your calendar?”

“He's not.”

“What does he want?”

“I think he's a magician.”

“A magician!” Goldstein laughed heartily. “Maybe he can wave a wand and fix that goddamn brickwork.”

“He wants to put on a show here.”

“Take care of it, Am. If he can pay the freight, he can put on any kind of show he likes.”

“It's you he wants to see, Nat. He apologized for ‘disrupting’ your morning.”

“How good of the man.”

“Actually he's a kid, just a kid. He also said he would ‘compensate’ your attention. Those are the words he used.”

“Whoa, nobody else has offered to compensate my anything lately. He sounds like an oddball, my angel. Give him the news on what it costs to rent us, and send him on his way.”

“Nat!”

“Whoa, why are you looking at me like that?”

“You should talk to him. He’s ... I don’t know, I think you should meet him.”

“What’s his name?”

“I didn’t think to ask!”

Goldstein sighed and put down his *cDawn*. He had been reading a news story about a professor in New Zealand who was infuriating theoretical physicists far and wide. For several years she had been adamantly promoting a radical theory in quantum mechanics, and just as adamantly being mocked by her peers. Goldstein had no interest in physics. His attention was drawn by the photo of the maverick professor. She was an exceptionally attractive young –

“Nat?”

“Okay, okay,” said Goldstein. “Send the kid in.”

.....

*2020:* As the covid pandemic swept the world, the boy’s mother strictly isolated herself in a small Vermont town. She spent the time pursuing mindfulness through meditation, and preparing the nursery for her son. Though she had declined an ultrasound she knew in her heart and soul her child was male.

To give birth in a hospital during the pandemic was, in her judgment, out of the question. The danger of contracting the virus was simply too great. A month before her due date the boy’s mother hired an elderly Jamaican mid-wife and quarantined the woman in her basement. To colleagues, friends, and the two men she called ‘principal uncles’ of the boy, she sent this invitation:

*Disheartened by these dark days of covid?*

*A redemptive moment is nigh.*

*You are hereby invited*

*to greet the birth of my son*

*who will soon rule my world.*

*On or about 15 September 2020*

*guests will gather behind glass.*

*Masks visors gowns and gloves*

*will be provided.*

*As for cameras bring your own!*

The boy's mother, clearly, was at once playful and ardently conscientious. How conscientious? The day her pregnancy was confirmed she set out to abolish both accident and melancholy in her life. On the one hand she embraced a fail-safe physical routine that preserved her from even the smallest of outward hazards, and on the other followed a spiritual regimen to promote inner serenity.

The boy was born on his anticipated due date. He slid almost effortlessly into the world. The Jamaican mid-wife cried out in a tropical singsong, "Lordy, lordy, nevah seen me the like," with an edge that left unsaid *I ain't foolin', man, I ain't damn foolin'!* Her name was Fiona and she had four children of her own, all sons, and though everyone assumed her cries were responding to the amazing ease of the delivery, she was in truth expressing bewilderment at something in the boy's face. It was a fine-looking infant face, yet unusual. Foreign? Somehow disadvantaged? No, no,

just different from what she had seen in the faces of hundreds of other newborns. The difference was a thing she could not put into words except to say she had never seen it before.

The boy apparently felt no reason to cry. His craning audience heard not even a whimper. He seemed preoccupied, perhaps still intent on some unfinished business in the womb. He answered Fiona's slap, to the astonishment of his rapt and masked audience, with a feisty burp. Then he opened his eyes to the wonders of existence.

His immediate environment was bordered by plexiglass and space-suited gawkers. When he studied the photos years later he would dub the spectators 'moon creatures'. The black woman who tenderly pulled him into existence was also garbed for outer limits adventure. Only his mother looked like a person, her bare face resplendent with relief and triumph.

In her arms, resting on her breast, the boy, now nearly a minute old and basking in alertness, let out a long sagacious squeal of laughter.

.....

2034: On any other occasion in Nathan Goldstein's life, if a young visitor claiming to be a magician walked into his office the theater owner would surely have sprung to his feet, extended a generous hand and said with a boom in his voice, "Great to meet you, kid! I hear you're a magician."

On that quiet Tuesday morning, however, something about the young visitor made Goldstein forget to stand up. He said to his wife Sheila that evening, "The kid was dressed like an ordinary kid. He looked like a lot of other kids. But for a second there he confused me. I went sideways."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know. The kid put me off balance. He had a way about him."

"A way?"

“Yeah, an *air* about him. Something!”

“How old is he?”

“I think he said fourteen.”

“So, a kid of fourteen put Nat Goldstein off balance because he had an *air* about him?”

“Sheil, that was just the start.”

.....

2020: During his first forty-eight hours the boy entered his mother’s life much like an army of a million would conquer a village. The process of conquest was all-engulfing.

He still had not cried. When he was not at his mother’s breast he was either gurgling, burping, or making sounds that ranged from quiet glee to all-out hilarity. His mother had the impression he was constantly tickled by the world. Whether it was a stuffed giraffe, somebody offering baby sounds, or nothing more than the bare ceiling above, his eyes would discover delight. On the third day of the boy’s life, when his mother finally moved her son to his crib, this happened:

The instant she put the boy down he let out a piercing scream. A scalded cat could not have let loose a more offended sound. It went on, the screaming, a relentless alarm of complaint until she scooped up the infant.

The obvious culprit was the crib, the confinement of its surrounding bars. The boy must have felt imprisoned. His proper station was atop a boundless place, a borderless place. His mother learned this by laying him in the middle of her large bed, whereupon the boy’s contemplative bearing and spasms of sheer joy immediately resumed. Whenever she tried laying him in the crib he just as quickly became an enraged banshee.

Thus the infant took up residence in his mother’s bed. She adored having him there. She spent hypnotic hours gazing at the phenomenon of him: his delicate features, natural state of gladness,

his *glow*. Thanks to him she was seeing poetry everywhere as she felt the stir and might of the deepest mysteries in this tiny being plucked from the momentum of generations and, yes, from the savage drive of her lust. She felt an elation she could not have predicted. The feeling arose from the energy she drew from her infant; from the synchronized spectacle of his waving arms and churning legs when he uncryingly signaled hunger and summoned her breast. And from his eyes! He was not yet days old and she was seeing in the deeps of his black eyes a greedy curiosity, a mixture of vexation and resolve, of stubborn inquiry into the infinite questions about what the world was, where it was going and why. Katty, she said to herself, you are traveling in unexplored territory, once-in-a-universe territory, your son's potential, his life's path.

The remarkable thing was her certainty that this thought did not take flight from inside her but from a runway within *him*.

.....

2034: Nat Goldstein not only failed to rise from his chair to welcome his young visitor, he also failed to issue his usual jovial greeting. The warmth of the bighearted man abruptly went AWOL and something unaccountable rushed into the vacancy. Goldstein heard himself ask, "What *country* are you from, kid?"

The question struck Goldstein as an absurdity the instant it left his lips. Without missing a beat the boy replied, "I'm American, sir," in a tone that forgave any expectation of a different answer. He then offered his hand and added, "I was born in Vermont."

"Vermont!" said Goldstein. "I had no idea they made magicians in Vermont!" He rose to his feet, shook the boy's hand, and felt his world reverting to its proper axis. Why had he asked the preposterous question? The boy in front of him might have climbed out of a Norman Rockwell painting for chrissake. Except maybe for the extreme blackness of that black hair.

“I hope I’m not catching you at an inconvenient moment, sir,” said the boy.

“You aren’t, you aren’t,” said Goldstein as he gave his visitor the once-over. The youngster was barely a teenager but well on his way to six feet. He seemed totally comfortable in his lanky frame, moving with a loose-limbed ease that suggested both innocence and affluence. He had clearly not dressed to impress. Or maybe he had! He was wearing a pressed denim shirt and baggy white pants. Goldstein was sure the shirt concealed a designer label. The kid was a generic high-schooler from the upper middle class.

“Take a seat, kid. Happy to say hello.”

“Thank you, sir. A very fine day to you.”

Goldstein saw now that the boy’s eyes were too big for his slim face and exactly the same color as his hair. Black as you can get, pitch black. Maybe it was this *noir* double feature, oddly startling, which had initially thrown Goldstein. And what was that “a very fine day to you” thing? The theater owner laughed.

“Sir?”

“Sorry, kid, don’t mind me. Sometimes the world gives me a chuckle.”

“It should, sir. That’s what the world is for.”

“Hey, I’ve never heard the world described that way,” said Goldstein. “Good for you. But before we go an inch further let’s get something straight. My late father was a ‘sir’. I’m a Nathan. Everybody calls me Nat. Got it?”

“Yes, sir – yes, Mr. Nat!”

Goldstein laughed again. He liked the kid. He liked the way he was guarding, even asserting, a respectful courtesy. He was sitting ramrod straight, chin inclined, hands joined in his lap. The shyness in him seemed perfectly balanced by his confidence. Goldstein saw now what might have



thrown him off during their first moment of meeting. It was the slight narrowing at the corners of the kid's eyes, an almost unnoticeable feature, certainly not oriental, just a hint of a groove, a suggestion of some kind of otherness. There was something else about the boy too, something meditative in his bearing, but it seemed to come *outward*, in the quality of his attention. That was it, thought Goldstein, he felt his visitor's attention reaching out, almost like a physical thing. This was some kid. He was sorry he would have to shatter any cockamamie plans he had come in with.

"So, Amelia tells me you're a magician."

"Actually, sir, I do not use that designation."

"She said you want to put on a magic show."

"Some will call it a show."

"You're confusing me, kid. What would you call it?"

"The results of my efforts could be called revelations," replied the boy, as casually as he would report the weather.

Oy, said Goldstein to himself. He was charmed by the young fellow and impressed by his vocabulary, but – revelations? Things had moved from Norman Rockwell to Walt Disney. Time to apply the hook and bring down the curtain.

"My boy, the rental cost for the theater is eight thousand dollars on a weekend night, and six thousand from Monday to Thursday. That's just the beginning of what it costs to open the door and put on a show."

"Understood," the boy replied. "I want to schedule the event for the first Tuesday of next month."

"Whoa, young fella!"

Goldstein leaned across his desk with a fatherly frown. For a moment he was at a loss for words, then remembered it was Tuesday. “By the way, isn’t this a school day? Why aren’t you in school?”

“My mum taught me at home until I was eight. Then she went back to her work. Since then I have been enrolled in an online school.”

“Your mother covered all the subjects?”

“Yes, sir. She followed a state law about home-schooling. The guidelines are meticulous, sometimes irksome. Of course my mum also supplemented the curriculum.”

“Apparently with twenty-dollar words.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“What grade are you in, kid?”

“Officially, eight.”

“And unofficially?”

“Waiting to hear from universities, especially Princeton. I wrote my SATs a few months ago. They are college entrance – ”

“I know what SATs are, God help me. I put two daughters through university.” Goldstein directed his guest’s attention to a collection of beautifully framed graduation certificates on the wall above a glass-enclosed trophy case. “They let me have their diplomas because they know I love showing them off. Those trophies in the case are also from my two princesses.”

“Congratulations on their many achievements, sir.”

“Thank you, but did I hear you right? You’re going to jump from grade eight to university?”

“Yes, sir.”

Goldstein sat back in his chair. He had a niece with Asperger’s syndrome. Rebecca was a lovely young lady, totally on the ball intellectually, a gifted violinist with the Cleveland Symphony, yet

also a little . . . off. He figured the youngster in front of him came from a similar place on the spectrum.

“I guess you’re what they call a born genius, kid. Good for you. Really, I’m impressed. You are a heck of a go-getter coming to see me like this, and you speak like a future senator, one of the good ones. But I have to tell you, even if you have the dough to rent my theater, there’s a whole lot of reasons why I wouldn’t let you. You can’t just come out of nowhere and put on a magic show in a big public theater. For one thing nobody would show up. You’ll be pouring money down the drain. But why am I talking about money? Money’s the last thing I should be talking about. How old are you, fourteen, fifteen? You have hundreds of hurdles to jump, thousands of miles to travel, before you can be a David Copperfield renting the Rialto.”

The boy replied, “I have watched many of David Copperfield’s performances. But he did tricks, sir. I am different from him. I do not do tricks.”

“If you’re a magician and you don’t do tricks, then what is it you do?”

“I think the word ‘revelations’ bothered you, sir. Maybe I should say ‘connections’ instead. I discover connections.”

“You discover connections?”

“Yes. All things are related, Mr. Goldstein. All things are connected.”

Goldstein lowered his forehead onto his palm. He wasn’t having fun anymore.

“Young fellow, I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

The expression on the boy’s face, merging deference with composure, hadn’t wavered since he arrived. He sat up still straighter in his chair. He said, “I understand completely, sir. Would you like me to show you what I mean?”

“Knock yourself out, kid.”

.....

2020: The boy's mother, her eyes glued to the face of her son, said, "My beautiful boy is going to live a long and eventful life."

She saw no vulnerability in her infant. Injury could not possibly come to this boy because he had so much to do and create. She saw too in her son a maturity borrowed from distant years when his features assumed repose and took on signs of wisdom. She came to believe his grandfatherly look was no ephemeral impression, nor one borrowed solely from ancestry. For her the maturity in his face was not a mirror of the past but rather, somehow too, of the future.

"Well, of course," agreed Theo, the more garrulous and romantic of the boy's two principal uncles. "The future flows in his veins. He is destined. He is the tip of the spear of evolution."

"Principal uncles tend toward hyperbole."

"Never! We deal only in objective truth."

The title 'principal uncle' had been coined by the boy's mother as a synonym for 'possible father'. It also doubled as a euphemism for those intolerant of promiscuity. The fact was, the boy's mother could not identify the boy's father.

For several years prior to giving birth she had enjoyed unconstrained relationships with both Theo and his rival, Jackson. She loved and craved both men, and both men reciprocated her emotions. Never did she favor one suitor over the other. Each brought her diverse pleasures by way of their different qualities. As there had been no pause in either relationship at the time of conception, she could not be sure who had unlocked her womb. Never would she allow a paternity test – why would she?

In the matter of her son's upbringing, as in the matter of her personal conduct and how she had forged an illustrious career, convention had little place. Her life was about headlong movement. She pledged ceaseless adherence to the benefits of two fathers for the boy.

.....

2034: Nat Goldstein's encouragement in the vernacular, *Knock yourself out, kid*, apparently struck his visitor like ridicule. The boy's eyes shaded. A tinge came into his cheeks. He was sitting tall in his chair but now felt the need to sit up still taller.

"Mr. Goldstein," said the boy, a note of gentle reprisal in his tone, "may I have a piece of paper? And I will need a pencil."

The theater owner produced a writing pad and ballpoint pen, amused by the contrition he was feeling. He hadn't meant any mockery.

"I am sorry," said the boy. "Do you have a pencil? We need a *pencil*."

Goldstein stifled three reactions at once: a chuckle, a protest, and renewed impatience. He dutifully rummaged in a drawer and found a copper-colored Marriott Hotel pencil. It was not quite sharp, but if the kid dared turn it down this visit would terminate *toute suite*.

The boy held the pencil to the light and admired it. "Perfect!" he said, breaking into a dazzling grin. "Superb color. I love the color of copper. I love pencils!"

Goldstein shook his head. He was reminded again of Rebecca, his slightly affected niece, playing exquisite violin in Cleveland. She too was known to flash glowing smiles for peculiar reasons.

The boy positioned the writing pad on his lap, out of Goldstein's view. He sat perfectly still, the pencil in his left hand poised in the air. His eyes fastened on his host. "I am going to write an eight digit number, Mr. Goldstein. It will be random, like the number produced in those lottery

shows where balls drop from spinning cages. I repeat, it will be a random number with eight digits. Please look into my eyes as I write.”

Circus sideshows came to Goldstein’s mind, but he suppressed his irritation and did as he was told. How in heaven’s name had he been drawn into this?

The boy’s black eyes peered into his host’s. Meanwhile his left hand, seeming to move autonomously from the rest of his body, descended gradually to the writing pad. Never taking his eyes from Goldstein’s, the boy composed a line of numbers. *Composed* was Goldstein’s own impression. It was the word he used that evening when he related the scene to his wife.

“Done,” said the boy, and he relaxed his visual grip on Goldstein.

“Wonderful,” said Goldstein, feeling liberated from he knew not what.

The boy delicately tore the page from the pad, folded it multiple times, and stood up. He put the little square of paper in his pocket, then asked, “Did you see the numbers I wrote down?”

“How could I have seen them, kid? You had my eyes locked.”

“Good, but I have to ask you the same question again. Are you sure, are you absolutely certain, that you did not see the numbers I wrote down?”

“For cryin’ out loud kid, I would have had to see through my desk to see the pad you were writing on. I’m not Superman, I don’t have X-ray vision.”

“Excellent. It is important you know beyond a shadow of a doubt, not for my sake but for your own, that you did not see the numbers.”

“Okay, fine. I know it without a doubt. I know it like I know my own name. I did not see your numbers! Now what’s your point?”

The boy placed the writing pad in front of Goldstein and laid the pencil on the pad. He said, “Please write an eight digit number. Any eight numerals that occur to you. Use the pencil, please. I will stand over there by the window.”

Goldstein took up the copper-colored pencil. A glimmer of interest peeped over the border of his impatience. The kid was standing by the window, motionless, looking out as if something had riveted his attention. He definitely had a way about him! The theater owner wrote down these eight numbers in a random flourish:

9 8 4 4 5 8 6 2

Then he held up the pad and said, “Here you are, young fellow. What comes next?”

The boy breathed in deeply as if he had just surfaced from a demanding dive. He crossed the room to Goldstein’s desk. He removed the little square of paper from his pocket and unfolded it to its original size. Without a glance at Goldstein’s numbers, with no ceremony save for shy magnanimity, he held up his own numbers. They were:

9 8 4 4 5 8 6 2

Nathan Goldstein said to his wife that evening, “I didn’t believe it. I only saw it.”

.....

2020: The boy’s mother began her journal of his milestones with a single sentence:

*November 10 2020*

*Today my darling took a leap that made my heart sing.*

She had previously shunned the idea of keeping a journal. She had little patience for writing, even less for punctuation. She considered herself a scribbler, and always put pen to paper with a heavy hand, literally a heavy hand.

The event that overcame her reluctance to start the journal happened on a day when her darling slept, uncharacteristically, late into the morning. As she studied his softly breathing face, she grew certain he was enjoying a wonderful dream. A smile tugged at his tiny lips. He nodded at intervals as if discreetly welcoming a procession of tributes. She naturally assumed he was on a throne of sorts, reviewing a parade of homage.

The boy came awake as sunlight flooded their bedroom. He kicked away the coverings and raised his arms as if to confirm his limbs were still obeying orders. Blinking, he took a leisurely look around. Then he focused on his mother. His big black eyes widened with recognition and his lips parted purposefully. He said eagerly, distinctly, unmistakably: “Mum!”

The boy was fifty-seven days old.

.....

2034: Nat Goldstein’s mind was churning. How had the trick been done? The kid had written down the numbers first. He, Goldstein, certainly hadn’t seen those numbers. Yet he, Goldstein, had then written down exactly the same numbers. How was that possible? He was no believer in mind reading, but even if he believed in mind reading the mind reader in this instance would have been himself! The thing he had just seen was not possible. He did not believe it. Yet he had seen it.

“Kid, how in God’s name did you do that?”

The boy did not reply but inclined his head quizzically as if to inquire, *Are you forgetting something?*

Goldstein took the reprimand well. “Of course,” he said. “You’re right. Magicians keep their secrets to themselves.”

“I am not a magician,” said the boy.



“Then you must be a hypnotist. Was I just hypnotized into believing something happened that could not have happened?”

The boy treated Goldstein to one of his unrestrained smiles, causing the theater owner to blink. The brightness in the kid’s face, the shine in his eyes – they seemed to generate extra light in the room.

“It is funny to think that,” said the boy. Then he added, his smile vanishing, “If people are hypnotized, they cannot do strong things. Hypnotism depends on ... weakness.”

“Weakness?”

“Yes. You have to be weak to be hypnotized. You are not weak, Mr. Goldstein.”

“Thanks kid, I wish you would tell that to my wife. But tell me, what did I just see if I didn’t see magic or hypnotism?”

“We discovered a connection.”

“What does that mean?”

“Discovering a connection is very different from hypnotism. Hypnotism depends on weakness. Discovering a connection depends on strength.”

“You’re talking rings around me, kid. You can call what you do whatever you want to call it, but I’ll call it magic. Deal?”

“No, but it is not important. We do not need a deal on what we call things.”

“Now you’re talking in a language I understand! You impress me, kid, I must tell you. You’ve also begun to persuade me you could put on a magic show. If you have, say, a dozen tricks like the one you just did, you’ll have a show. And if all your tricks are as good as the one you just did, your show will dynamite people out of their seats.”

“That is not my purpose,” replied the boy.

“What’s not your purpose?”

“To, as you say, ‘dynamite people out of their seats’.”

“Kid, you’re confusing me. You just blew me out of *my* seat, and I’m an old grouch who thinks he’s seen it all. What the heck else do you want to do in a theater if you don’t want to blow people out of their seats?”

“I told you. Reveal strength.”

“You want to show people how strong you are?”

“No, no. How strong *they* are.”

“You’re making me dizzy, kid. Just tell me, do you have a bunch more tricks? Excuse me, a bunch more ‘connections’ or whatever you call them?”

The boy’s solar smile invaded the room again. The theater owner blinked again. It wasn’t simply the brightness in the kid’s face and the gleam in those night-black eyes. Now he sensed the kid was on a spectrum of his own. He thought it must be a spectrum they hadn’t named yet, or even knew about yet. Oy, if he told Sheila these things she might send for the men in white coats.

“The connections around us are countless, Mr. Goldstein,” his visitor replied. “So, yes, if we wait a little while, we can identify another.”