

# 619: The Magic Show

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June 30, 2017

## Prologue

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### Ira Glass

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I have no idea what gave me the confidence to start performing magic shows for money when I was 12. I wasn't especially good. I hadn't been doing it for long. I'm not sure I'd ever been to a magic show. I was a beginner. I was a real beginner. I'd been given one of those magic kits like you give a little kid that they sell at toy stores.

And then I went to the Baltimore County Public Library on Liberty Road, and found some books on magic in the library. And it blew my mind, these books. These incredible secrets were just like sitting there, right there in the shelves, in the open. Anybody could look at them. I could not understand why anybody was in any of the other aisles. I just felt like, oh, they don't know. They don't know these are here.

Before long, I was advertising in the *Baltimore Jewish Times*. I was booking shows that paid \$5. I believe the price was in the ad. These were kids' birthday parties. My dad would drive me. The kids' parents would drive me home.

After a few months of this, I got a call from a real magician-- like an adult who actually knew what he was doing-- who had noticed somebody undercutting his prices. Who are you, he asked. It wasn't hostile. The magic world in Baltimore was small, and everybody knew everybody. So to have somebody new show up, like, he was just curious.

And generous. He let me know that there was a magic store downtown on Charles Street where guys got together. Yogi Magic Mart. On Saturdays, the place would be crowded with any magicians who did not have gigs that day. And they would smoke, and show each other moves. An old guy named Dantini with a huge white beard used to go there. He would give you one of his special coins that was stamped with the words Dantini. He knew Houdini.

When you bought a trick, they took you to this special table in the back room and sat you down. And taught it to you, one on one. As I remember it, this was done with kindness, with helpful tips-- how to tilt your hand, how to turn your body, when to pause for effect. It was exciting to be taken seriously by these men. Sharing these secrets.

I did my act from 7th grade through my sophomore year of high school, and so many times it got kind of carved into me. I could have probably performed it word for word and move for move up through my 30s. But now, I'd have a hard time. I still regularly have dreams that I'm supposed to do the act. I had one two weeks ago.

We decided to do this week's radio show about magic when I learned that David Kestenbaum, one of my coworkers here, was also a kid magician. And also played birthday parties for years, starting when he was in fourth grade. And the moment we sat down in the studio to talk about this, like, it only took about a minute to be comparing card moves with the four aces.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Yeah, one of them is face up, right? But you can still go one, two, three, four.

**Ira Glass**

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All I know is that you're doing a double lift on that first ace.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Triple lift.

**Ira Glass**

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A triple lift?

**David Kestenbaum**

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Then you got to do an Elmsley count, though.

**Ira Glass**

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And very quickly, we just started comparing gear.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Appearing cane. Also disappearing cane.

**Ira Glass**

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Oh, I had the disappearing cane.

**David Kestenbaum**

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You didn't have the appearing cane?

**Ira Glass**

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The appearing cane seemed sort of dangerous. Doesn't it sort of s-- have a mechanis--

**David Kestenbaum**

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Don't say it, don't say it!

**Ira Glass**

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I won't. But doesn't it have a thing where you can get hurt?

**David Kestenbaum**

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Yes, it can be dangerous. The metal one can be dangerous. I had the plastic one. It was cheaper.

**Ira Glass**

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So when I was 12 years old, I had business cards. I was a 12-year-old with business cards. And mine said on it my name and "Magical Mystifier."

**David Kestenbaum**

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Well, my business card and said "Master Magician." Which is like, it seems like it's some level like a black belt level or something. You know, like a certified master magician or something. But--

**Ira Glass**

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Yeah. No.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Yeah, but it's pretty funny. Like, imagine a 12-year-old kid walks up to you and hands you a business card that says "Master Magician."

**Ira Glass**

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It would be more amazing if they walked up to you and handed you a card that said "Certified Plumber."

**David Kestenbaum**

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[LAUGHS]

**Ira Glass**

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So David and I were talking about this stuff. And he said this thing that honestly had never crossed my mind ever in my life until he brought it up. We were talking about whether we were any good.

**David Kestenbaum**

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I always thought I was fine. And then it occurred to me that maybe the reason I got hired wasn't that I was any good. It was that I was 10 years old. And it was probably adorable to have this little magician come over in his three-piece suit and do tricks for your kid's

birthday.

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**Ira Glass**

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I feel like this is obviously true. And I'm finding it so upsetting. Because what I realized is, I thought I was the one who was in charge of the situation during the magic show. And I was controlling everybody's minds with my mind and my magickry. And what you're saying is actually that the joke was on me. Like I was the entertainment, but not in a way that I understood.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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It's got to be true, right? Like, that's clearly, to me as an adult-- if you're like hey, there's this little kid who'll come over and do magic for your party, I'm like, done.

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**Ira Glass**

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Fact is, when I usually think about my years doing magic shows, the biggest feeling I have about it is I feel embarrassment. There's like a cloud of embarrassment that keeps me from staring at it too closely. Like, I know I was doing these store-bought tricks and beginners-level sleight of hand in a tuxedo and bow tie and a cape with a bright red lining. And what I remember of the act, some of it is pretty corny.

But at the same time, I can say for sure, like, audiences were engaged. They were engaged from beginning to end. Like, people were not restless. And I know I got laughs. And I thought I was good. Like, it seemed like I was good. So was I? [LAUGHS] After talking to David, I realized I do not have a clear picture of this at all. And you know, there are things about our past that we'll never fully get into proper perspective. But this? This is a completely answerable question.

So I called Judy Meltzer, who was a good friend of my mom's when my mom was alive, who lived around the corner from us. And who booked me not once but twice for her daughter Amy's birthdays.

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**Judy Meltzer**

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First of all, I mean, you did it for quite a time. Because one time-- I mean, I wanted to get your magic tricks for your bar mitzvah. Which you almost didn't have, as I recall.

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**Ira Glass**

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That's right.

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**Judy Meltzer**

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Anyway, and I went to the magic store-- your mother gave me the name of it-- downtown, the one you frequented. And you were very good at it.

**Ira Glass**

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Well, this is the thing I was trying to get a fix on, is was I bad?

**Judy Meltzer**

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No, are you kidding me? You think I would have-- of course not! You were great. You did a terrific job. You liked it a lot. You think you're doing something different now?

**Ira Glass**

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[LAUGHS] Yes, I am doing something different now.

**Judy Meltzer**

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No, you're not. No, you're not. Oh, no. I'm sorry. I don't buy that. OK. You think what you want, I'll think what I want.

**Ira Glass**

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Wait, wait, wait. You're saying when you hear me on the radio, it reminds you of my magic act?

**Judy Meltzer**

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It reminds me of who you have always been, as far as I'm concerned. You were good. And not only that, you had a spiel, of course, that went with it. Wasn't that you just kind of did a trick and stuck it out there.

**Ira Glass**

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Yeah.

**Judy Meltzer**

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Like that's it, and you-- no. You had a nice flowing reper-- what do you call it?

**Ira Glass**

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A patter.

**Judy Meltzer**

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Patter? OK, thank you. Yeah. You did that. But I know you were very professional, with the outfit and everything.

**Ira Glass**

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Yeah. I wore a cape.

**Judy Meltzer**

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Yes! By the way, you didn't just wear the cape. You used it.

**Ira Glass**

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[LAUGHS] What do you mean? What did I do with the cape? What are you talking about?

**Judy Meltzer**

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You know, like you would flip the side back. And it was a very professional way of wearing the cape.

**Ira Glass**

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Yeah, I loved that cape.

**Judy Meltzer**

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[LAUGHS] Yes.

**Ira Glass**

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OK. Reassuring. But after David and I realized our common conjuring careers as Magical Mystifier and Master Magician, we were talking, and we realized that so much of our pleasure in magic was just knowing how the tricks were done. The equipment itself was kind of mesmerizing, with its false chambers and flaps and secrets that the audience didn't know. Every trick had a principle behind it. And it was cool to think about the principles.

The magician Ricky Jay once said this thing in an interview. He said that there are many effects in magic where what's going on behind the scenes is actually much more interesting than what the audience sees. And as a magician, you sort of want to say, if only you could know what's really happening here.

In putting today's show together, David and I dove into a bunch of stories with actual master magicians. And I have to say, the most exciting moments in all those stories are about that. About how intricate and psychological and ingenious what they do is. And even as we've been writing and editing the stories over and over, I've gotten that feeling of excitement about it that I used to get handling the props or practicing the cups and balls.

And that's today's show. From WBEZ Chicago, it's *This American Life*. I'm Ira Glass. Stay with us.

**Act One: The Oldest Trick in the Book**

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**Ira Glass**

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Act one-- the oldest trick in the book. It can take years to come up with a magic trick. Several magicians told me this. Which made me wonder, what are they doing all that time? What takes years to make something that's just a couple of minutes long? And this is the part of magic I really knew nothing about from my time as a kid magician. I never invented a trick. Didn't even occur to me.

So I wanted to see it. You know how on *MTV Cribs*, when they would do the house tours and get to the bedrooms, guys would always say, this is where the magic happens. And, OK, very different context. But the act of inventing a magic trick, that's actually where the magic happens. And I wanted to finally witness the dark beating heart of where magic comes from. I wanted a magician to explain step by step what takes years.

And the one magician who seemed not just interested, but actually kind of eager to come forward and do that was Teller of Penn and Teller. Teller is the smaller one, the one who never speaks in the act. But of course, in real life, he talks. And he liked the idea of explaining how a trick is made. He once said in a lecture, because--

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### **Teller**

If you understand a good magic trick-- and I mean really understand it, right down to the mechanics at the core of its psychology-- the magic trick gets better, not worse.

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### **Ira Glass**

The trick he agreed to explain here on the radio is one that he loves to perform. He performs a lot. And he started working on it years ago, looking to invent something new for Penn and Teller's live stage show.

There was this old effect that he was intrigued by. It seemed like there might be something in it that he could adapt for himself. It's not unusual for a magician like Teller to take some secret from a very old trick, and repurpose it into something original. This particular one came from a magic book written in the 1920s and '30s by a guy in Nebraska named David P Abbott, an amateur magician who made his living as a loanshark. He was famous among magicians back then. He'd invent these incredible effects and perform them, but only in his living room. He thought that was the best place for magic.

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### **Teller**

Houdini, Thurston, Keller-- all the big names of magic would come to this guy's little house in Omaha, Nebraska to see these great shows. And towards the end of his life, when people would come to his house, he would show you the book that he had that was all of his magic explained in detail. He died. The book wasn't published. His wife said she would publish it. She died two years later. The house was sold. The book had vanished.

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### **Ira Glass**

It was a legend in a certain corner of the magic world, this lost book with these incredible secrets. One publisher went on a decades long quest to locate the book. Found pieces of it, and then finally, a full manuscript in four legal-size loose-leaf binders, 40 years later in 1974, and put it into print for the first time.

And the trick that attracted Teller was this golden ball, six inches across like a small cannonball, that Abbott could float around his living room. That was supposed to be one of the most beautiful routines in magic. That's exactly Teller's taste. Teller loves doing silent, beautiful tricks alone on stage. And solo bits like this are in every Penn and Teller stage show. His most famous trick is a pantomime, with a rose, its shadow, and a carving knife.

**Teller**

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I like stripping things down to the absolute simplicity. And it seems like a ball and a hoop and a person is about as simple as you can get.

**Ira Glass**

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So, he got to work.

**Teller**

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And I started by taking the original David P Abbott book, this long lost book, and I set this book on a music stand in my library at home. And I learned this.

**Ira Glass**

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Let me just pause on this page. So this is a page which has seven photographs. And is that Abbott?

**Teller**

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That's David P Abbott, yes. He looks a bit like a white-haired fireplug.

**Ira Glass**

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And he's in a black suit. And he's moving a hoop over a ball. And there's little arrows indicating which way you turn it, this way and that.

**Teller**

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Yes. The level of detail that he provided was astounding. So I mean, I feel like he is speaking directly to me. He tells you how to make the papier-mache that you make the ball out of! You know, strips of newspaper, x wide. And let me let me show you some of the beautiful, beautiful floating moves that he created.

**Ira Glass**

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OK, we're standing up and walking across the stage.

Maybe I should have mentioned this earlier-- Teller and my coworker David Kestenbaum and I are doing this interview on the stage where Penn and Teller do their magic show five nights a week in Las Vegas, in a big theater at the Rio Hotel.

**Teller**

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And we're going to have to go quite a distance to get this to work.

**Ira Glass**

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Teller picks up the ball and the thread. He asked us not to say anything here on the radio about the details of where the thread goes or how exactly it interacts with the ball. But there's still a lot I can say. So picture a guy and a hoop and a ball and a very long thread on a stage.

**Teller**

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The early days of this, I'm learning moves to make the ball float.

**Ira Glass**

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And now I'll say, the ball is floating up the string toward you, and then from your left hand to your right hand.

**Teller**

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You're actually catching the sound of it, which is not normally audible to an audience member.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Actually, can I just record-- can you just do it--

[STRING GLIDE SOUND]

**Ira Glass**

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Teller gestures at the ball like he's summoning it with his hand. And it glides along the thread to him. That's the sound you're hearing. And what's mind-bending is that David and I can actually see that he's tilting the thread downwards, and that's why it slides towards him. Like we can see the ball is on a thread. We can see how it's done. We hear it sliding along.

**David Kestenbaum**

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God, that's pretty.

**Ira Glass**

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And at the same time, it totally looks like he's this sorcerer who enchanted this inanimate object into obeying him.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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Dude, that is so beautiful actually when you see the thread.

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**Teller**

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Yes, it is. I mean, here's one of David P Abbott's moves that he invented. The ball is floating from hand to hand without really any movement on the part of either of the hands, just by an intricate way that the thread is interlaced in the fingers.

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**Ira Glass**

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He then takes the hoop and spins it around the ball in various ways, which makes it look like there can't possibly be a thread there. But of course, we can see the thread.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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Can I say that's crazy? That's so convincing. Your brain really cannot sort that out.

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**Teller**

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Your brain cannot sort this out. It's visual double-talk. It's amazing. And I'm sitting here and I'm doing it, and it's still fooling my brain.

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**Ira Glass**

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Which I totally remember from being a kid magician, and practicing the thumb palm and the French drop and all the other sleight of hand in front of a mirror. If you do it right, it fools you. It feels amazing to you. And that's how you know the trick is working.

So this was Teller's first step toward inventing his own version of the trick. He spent months mastering David P Abbott's moves from 100 years ago. And started to figure out what else he could make the ball do on his own. He would practice everyday. He took the ball and thread on vacation with him, and videotaped himself to see how the moves looked.

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**Teller**

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Oh, no-- well, I'll show you this one. Here I am in a cabin in Utah in my pajamas. [LAUGHS] I was just obsessed with it.

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**Ira Glass**

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He took a trip to Toronto where a magician friend taught him the version of the floating ball routine that he did. And then when Teller was there, he tried this thing, just kind of messing around. He put the ball on a bench, and lifted one end of the bench. And then made the ball

roll up the bench.

And then later, he had this thought-- that the floating ball was actually more interesting to watch when it's not floating. When it's just this ball that's somehow alive and rolling around. It's weirder and it's more mysterious. It's less clear what's propelling it.

### **Teller**

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It began to cross my mind that no one had ever done a floating ball that didn't float. And I was jubilant. I thought, oh boy, I finally got an idea! I finally got an original idea to go with this method.

### **Ira Glass**

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The next step was to put something together into a routine-- like an actual trick as it might be performed. This involved a tremendous amount of invention, making up all kinds of new moves on his own for the floating ball that does not float.

### **Teller**

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Here's a move where I kick it across the stage and it lands softly.

### **Ira Glass**

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Let me just describe what you're doing. So you're kicking the ball and it's going maybe 12 feet out there.

### **Teller**

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And then suddenly coming to a stop.

### **Ira Glass**

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And just sitting on the floor.

### **Teller**

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What you would think in real life, if you kick a ball, the ball doesn't stop until it runs out of momentum. So this is suddenly that ball stops, stops dead. Unbelievably difficult. It's me using leverage and slack and all sorts of things like that.

### **Ira Glass**

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He spent months inventing these moves at night, alone in the theater, after they finished their shows. And all this was preparation to show his partner, Penn, who at this point hadn't seen anything. It was a lot of preparation. All sorts of things. Like he'd been practicing with a

silver ball, like David P Abbott's mysterious floating gold orb. But now he replaced it with a kid's ball that bounced, the size of a kickball. Because magic is more magical if you do it with real stuff that people know.

And he built a set. It was chain-link fence, because he thought, where do you see a kid's ball? At a playground. But, he says, when he put the chain-link fence up on stage, it suddenly felt like the set of Godspell. And he ditched it.

David and I asked Teller, why didn't you just show Penn something rough? Just something with the moves you'd been inventing. And he said, no. no, no. That's the thing about magic.

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**Teller**

You can't look at a half-finished piece of magic and know whether it's good or not. It has to be perfect before you can evaluate whether it's good. I mean, magic is a fantastically meticulous form. You forgive other forms. A musician misses a note, moves on, fine. He'll come to the conclusion of the piece. Magic is an on/off switch. Either it looks like a miracle or it's stupid.

So I spent up-- I would guess it was probably 11 months or so, putting together a routine of moves that I invented with the non-floating floating ball. And I showed it to Penn.

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**Ira Glass**

Describe the act that he saw. Like what was it?

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**Teller**

I believe that what he saw was very, very artsy. It was very lonely. It was very sweetly melancholy. I was trying to recreate that sense of solitude in a theater late at night.

And he sat way back in the theater, way towards the back, so that he could get a wide stage view of it. I finished it. And he quietly got up and left the theater. And I thought, hmm, that's probably not a good sign. So I went back to his dressing room, and we talked for a while.

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**Penn Jillette**

I remember being in the dressing room and being really, really, really wicked uncomfortable.

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**Ira Glass**

This, of course, is Teller's stage partner, Penn Jillette.

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**Penn Jillette**

There was nothing about it that grabbed me. I thought it was technically good as a juggling bit, I thought it was OK.

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**Ira Glass**

Juggling, he means the mechanics of moving the ball around.

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**Penn Jillette**

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It was the first time we really had something that outside of the overlap.

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**Teller**

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To get into the Penn and Teller Show, it has to be an idea that appeals to both Penn and me. And he said-- and to his credit, he said that he thought it was way too *Cirque Du Soleil*. It was way too sort of artsy, pretentious.

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**Penn Jillette**

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I remember Teller getting a little bit mad at me. Because I said, what's the idea behind this? And he was very offended. He was like, well, the idea is the trick. You know?

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**Teller**

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And I think it hadn't clicked with him because it lacked an essential dramatic idea. Of course, to me, I was all wrapped up in the idea that it was a floating ball that wasn't floating, which isn't a very good idea. I mean, that's not an idea that communicates to an audience.

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**Ira Glass**

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The next day at Starbucks, they talked about what idea might work with the trick. Penn suggested presenting it as a kind of history piece. An old classic with period music. That kind of thing they would do in a magic history conference. Teller got excited about that. Emailed him later, adding to the idea. Like they'd tell the audience he was using a method from a hundred years ago, without electronic technology and no help from offstage.

Imagining that version of the trick, Penn wrote him back, quote, "From reading this, I've lost a little faith in the idea. I guess we can try this. But it doesn't seem to bring another level in. Maybe we should just do it the way you wanted, and not look for more here. I'm sure people will like it fine. I don't know. This seems to make a lot of what I didn't like maybe worse. I don't know. I don't have to like every bit in the show, that's for sure,"

Teller didn't like that. Seemed wrong for Penn to settle. He got back to work to solve the problem. And here's where making this trick turn from just the mechanics of moving a ball around on a thread to actually thinking through what tells a story, what's engaging, what's fun to watch, what's satisfying. And Teller realized one of the things that was missing from the trick. He says any magic trick is better if there's a reason the magic happens. So for instance--

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**Teller**

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If you put, let's say, a coin into your hand, close your hand, snap your fingers, open it, and the coin is gone, there's not much of an impact to that. And the reason for that is that the action seems arbitrary. That there doesn't seem to be a cause that makes that event happen.

**Ira Glass**

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Oh, like why would a coin disappear.

**Teller**

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Yes. If you put the same coin in your hand, close your hand, and even do just this-- even just, say, take out a match. Light the match, pass it around your hand, and act with a sudden jolt as though something has happened inside your head where the coin melted away, and you've been burnt. And you open your hand and there's no coin now. That level of acting, that level of causality that suggests that somehow the fire of a match could make a coin melt away, suddenly adds a dimension to it that I think is pretty crucial.

**Ira Glass**

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Also, it gives it a story.

**Teller**

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It gives it a little bit of a story. It gives it emotion. And I realized that I was doing all of this stuff with nothing causing it. There was no cause. Why is the ball moving around? The ball is just moving around. It was just arbitrary movement.

**Ira Glass**

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One of Teller's collaborators, a veteran magician named Johnny Thompson, gave him a suggestion that changed everything, though. He said you've got to treat the book like a trained dog. That would give a reason for its movement. A logic, a cause. So Teller tried it.

**Teller**

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I thought, well, you know, what does typically a trained dog do? It jumps through a hoop. So a trained dog is not always going to do what you want it to do. So I'd hold up the hoop, and the dog wouldn't respond. I'd call the dog, and instead of jumping through the hoop, it would come over and land on the rim of the hoop. I sit down and ignore it. What does a dog do when you ignore it? Well, it very often comes to you.

And here's what's happening. What's happening is, I'm realizing that the plot of this is the dog trainer is getting the dog to jump through a hoop. That becomes the plot. That becomes a little bit of a story.

**Ira Glass**

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Now he had a plot and a story. Teller did something else at this stage that's so essential and basic to the kind of drama that particularly happens in a magic show.

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**Teller**

One of the things that you do as a magician is you try to put yourself in the position of the audience at every moment. And you say, what would I be thinking at this moment? And you try to manipulate that. And one of the ways you do that is by giving the audience a little chance to figure something out, and then take it away from them.

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**Ira Glass**

And so he does that with this routine. Re-imagines it. The ball starts on the bench, always in contact with the bench. So the audience will think the ball is controlled by the bench. And then he lifts the ball off the bench. It sticks to his finger and floats in the air. So they might conclude that it's his finger that controls the ball. And then it drops to the floor, away from his finger.

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**Teller**

So each time you think of something, I give you the chance to think of that, and then I take it away from you, one thing after the other.

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**Ira Glass**

It takes a lot of work. He finishes the new routine, shows it to his partner Penn, who hates it. Truly, truly hates it.

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**Penn Jillette**

Yes, he makes it further away from what my taste would be. [LAUGHS] At least when it was an abstract moving thing, it's closer to my taste. Once it becomes something like a dog, it's moved very far out of my taste.

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**Ira Glass**

Because you hate an animated object.

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**Penn Jillette**

I do! I do! I hate anthropomorphism. I don't like relationships with animals or inanimate objects at all.

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**Ira Glass**

Which is basically what this is.

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**Penn Jillette**

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Yeah. But see, the thing is, where is my argument?

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**Ira Glass**

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Where is his argument? Like, what is he supposed to say? This is a delicate conversation, right? Here are these two men who respect each other, but don't socialize or hang out together. Who have been arguing, they say, constantly and fiercely, but productively for over 40 years. And Penn knows how much work Teller has put into this trick. And how much he would enjoy performing it every night.

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**Penn Jillette**

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He's not saying this outright, but it's implicit-- this is beautiful. This is mystifying. This is entertaining. People will love it. It's really important to me. All those five things are true. So it's very, very uncomfortable.

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**Ira Glass**

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Uncomfortable because Penn agrees. It's a great trick. Totally works. He just doesn't like it. It doesn't feel like their show to him, this red ball that's also a disobedient puppy. That's like the kind of idea you might see in a cartoon. And they try to build the show around the principle that there should be nothing in the show that feels even vaguely familiar to the audience. Nothing you can imagine seeing in anybody else's work.

So Penn doesn't say yes. But he doesn't say no either. He says to Teller, to be in the show, it still needs one more idea to really make it ours. And out of respect for each other, they try to come up with that idea.

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**Teller**

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And I don't know which one of us brought it up. I think I'm the one who said, what if we actually said-- I said, you know, when Mike Close and Johnny Thompson came and watched me do this trick--

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**Ira Glass**

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These are two other magicians they admire.

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**Teller**

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--they knew there was a thread there. And because they knew there was a thread there, they were more baffled than an audience that could imagine that this was being done with a little gyroscope inside the ball. So I said, what if we say right out at the top, here's a trick that's done with a piece of thread and a special backdrop. And Penn said, I think all you need is, now here's a trick that's done with a piece of thread.

That gives them so much. It brings them over onto our side. And suddenly, this now had an idea. And the idea was bigger than the little plot with the little ball. It was bigger than all the little magic tricks. It was that you can state the actual method of a magic trick clearly at the beginning of it, and it can still fool the hell out of people. That by knowing this extra piece of information, the trick becomes better.

### **Ira Glass**

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In other words, give the audience in the theater the same feeling that David and I had standing on stage, seeing the thread, and still feeling amazed. Not that the audience can see the thread, but they know it's there somewhere. Penn did lobby a little for sudden change in lighting that boom, would reveal the thread to the audience, fully visible. But in the end, this solution, just telling them about the thread, was enough for him.

And 18 months after Teller picked up David P Abbott's book to practice for the first time, he and Penn added the ball to their show. It's not the longest they've ever worked on a trick. Not even close. They told me about one that took them six years. And making anything good takes time.

### **Ira Glass**

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There's a quote that your partner of 40 years, Penn Jillette, said about you. It's kind of mean. There's no better partner than Teller. He's not the smartest or most creative person I've ever been around, but he's the hardest working. He will not give up. You can put him on a single task, and in the middle of it, hit him with a baseball bat square in the face, and he goes right back to the task.

### **Teller**

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[LAUGHS] Well, I'm sure he's talking directly about this bit. [LAUGHS] And that is true. It is true. I have a certain dog with a slipper quality about me. [LAUGHS] Especially-- I do trust my gut. This trick that we do in the show is not the trick that I thought we were going to do. But it is the trick that was calling out to me. You know?

### **Ira Glass**

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Teller teared up as he said this. I told his partner, Penn.

### **Penn Jillette**

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Yeah. He does. He does get choked up about it. There's stuff I get choked up about, too. That's not it.

### **Ira Glass**

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They are very different people, Penn and Teller. Even the way they tell this story, in Teller's telling, the story has a happy ending. They added the extra idea, compromise was reached. The partnership worked. When Penn tells the story, the compromise is a little deeper.

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**Penn Jillette**

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I think that Teller does a beautiful job and the audience loves it. And I kind of zone out. It doesn't feel like the whole bit just snaps into what it should be. You know it doesn't feel like--

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**Ira Glass**

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You mean now? Even now?

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**Penn Jillette**

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Oh yeah, now. Yeah.

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**Ira Glass**

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Even now, you're not into that trick.

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**Penn Jillette**

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No. Maybe Teller may not know that. But, I mean, Teller may have noticed that every show order we come up with, at some point, I suggest we have a show without the red ball. He might notice that. I don't often note it. It is a pattern that shows up. But, can I say again, really good trick. He does a beautiful job. He worked really hard. And the audience loves it.

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**Ira Glass**

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Teller told me, of course he knew that Penn still had his doubts. You don't work together so long, he said, without knowing something like that.

Interestingly, after five years of performing this trick, they changed the ending to add more of what Penn wanted, which is to underline the fact that it's done with the thread a little more. You can see this version of the trick online. There's a video from Penn & Teller's TV show, *Fool Us*. We have a link at our website.

Here's what they added to finally finish the trick for good, over six years after Teller first started practicing with Abbott's book. At the end of the routine, Penn walks out onstage, grabs the thread from Teller, and then dangles the ball from the thread. Penn takes an oversized scissors, cuts the thread. The ball drops to the ground, and Penn kicks the ball across the stage. He looks mad. He's just acting, of course. But he lays into that ball with gusto.

Coming up, making a very, very big object-- an object too big to fit in a building-- making it disappear. That's in a minute from Chicago Public Radio when our program continues.

It's *This American Life*, I'm Ira Glass. Today's program, "The Magic Show." My coworker David Kestenbaum and I, both of us former kid magicians, return to magic as adults, and it all looks very different. Today's show was first broadcast a year ago.

## Act Two: The Lady Vanishes

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### David Kestenbaum

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This is a trick I loved when I was a kid. I'd kind of forgotten about it. And then one night, I was home recently watching the TV show, *The Americans*. The show is about this family living in the US in the 1980s. The parents are undercover Russian spies. Because it's set in the 1980s, these big historic moments pop up. President Reagan getting shot, Iran-Contra.

But then this one episode, it opens with this--

Mom, this is the Statue of Liberty.

David Copperfield's making the Statue of Liberty disappear on TV.

Every single person I know is going to be watching this.

Mom, dad, come on! He's about to do it!

### David Kestenbaum

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I remember this exact moment happening in my house. I was 13 years old, about the same age as those kids. And as a kid magician, I think I'd circled the time and channel in the TV Guide. That was our family system for reserving the television. When I've tried to relive this amazing moment in American history with other people, though, I get mostly blank stares. But I figured someone involved with *The Americans* must have been a nerd like me. Because there's like two minutes of the show where the family is just watching the trick on television.

How'd he do that?

I have no idea.

### David Kestenbaum

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So I reached out. And yeah, one of the producers of *The Americans*, Joel Fields, was just like me.

### Joel Fields

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I was in my parent's wood-paneled den in Toronto, Canada, on their brown corduroy couch. It's extremely possible I brought some friends.

### David Kestenbaum

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Just like me in one other way too.

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**Joel Fields**

I was a magician.

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**David Kestenbaum**

As a kid, the whole thing, hanging out at the local magic shop. His colleague Joe Weisberg was there, also-- the creator of *The Americans*. Joe kept ribbing us through the interview.

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**David Kestenbaum**

Where were you when you watched the David Copperfield special?

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**Joe Weisberg**

Not watching the David Copperfield special.

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**David Kestenbaum**

Were even aware that it had happened?

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**Joe Weisberg**

I would have to say no.

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**David Kestenbaum**

For those of you who were not following the national magic scene in the 1980s-- and I realize now there are many of you-- David Copperfield was one of two truly big name illusionists at the time. It felt like he was in a kind of battle with the other one, Doug Henning. Both had TV specials on separate networks. Copperfield was handsome, clean cut. Henning was the hippie, wearing tie dye with long hair and teeth that hadn't seen braces.

I was squarely team Copperfield. My boss, Ira Glass, I learned while we were editing this story, 1,000% team Henning. Loved Henning's goofy sense of wonder. Which I hated. Copperfield, my man, seemed driven, intent on proving that he was the best in the world. Going bigger every time. In his previous TV special, he'd made an airplane disappear. Joe was somehow unaware of this too.

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**Joe Weisberg**

Was the airplane on the ground or in the sky?

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**David Kestenbaum**

No, it was on the ground.

## **Joe Weisberg**

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Well, that's not-- you know.

## **David Kestenbaum**

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It was, actually. People stood around this airplane in a ring, holding hands. And it just vanished. The Statue of Liberty? Even more amazing. I watched it again with Joe and Joel. And here I'll just narrate for you.

Imagine it's 1983. You're in the family living room on some couch.

Tonight, the illusion of the century. David Copperfield will attempt to make the Statue of Liberty disappear.

## **David Kestenbaum**

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The TV special opens with helicopter footage of the statue. The illusion happens at night, so it's all lit up. We fly up by the crown, the torch. And then cut to the man himself, David Copperfield, looking like a teen heartthrob-- big, dark eyes, some sort of silvery Rockstar jacket. And this, of course, didn't register with me as a middle school kid, but he's young to be taking on something so ambitious-- 26 years old. He gives this little speech.

Good evening. I'm David Copperfield. And tonight, we're here on Liberty Island. People come to this island by boat. I made the trip quite frequently during this past year getting ready for tonight.

A couple of weeks ago when I was on the boat, a young sightseer about seven years old came up to me and said, are you David? He said he saw me make a car disappear. And then he said he saw me make the jet plane disappear. I thanked him. And I watched as he looked up at the Statue of Liberty. Then at me. And back to the statue. And back to me. Finally, he looked me right in the eye and said, are you thinking what I think you're thinking? That's what I was thinking, all right.

## **David Kestenbaum**

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I somehow doubt it happened exactly like that. But whatever. Finally, it's time.

David's magic is performed with absolutely no camera tricks. The illusion you are watching at home is exactly the way he is doing it now.

## **David Kestenbaum**

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Copperfield has an audience sitting right there on Liberty Island at the foot of the statue. Everyone is sitting on this stage-- it's outdoors-- looking up at the huge Statue of Liberty, which is about 200 feet away. There are spotlights on it and a helicopter circling overhead.

Our view is the same as the audience. We're just behind them, looking up at the statue too. On either side of the stage or two big scaffolding towers, kind of framing the shot. You have a view of the statue between them.

What happens next is one continuous camera shot-- no visible edits. A giant curtain is hoisted up, suspended between those two scaffolding towers. You can't see the statue now, but it has to be there, right behind the curtain. Then Copperfield puts his left hand to his temple, closes his eyes. This is a signature Copperfield move, familiar to me even now. It's as if he's doing it with his mind. A few seconds pass, the curtain drops. And it's freakin' gone. The statue's gone.

The spotlights are there. The helicopters is still circling. But now, circling nothing. Just empty space. The camera cuts to reactions from the audience. Everyone seems astonished. There's one guy wearing a priest collar.

I was amazed. I don't see it. It was there, and it's not there anymore.

Do you have any ideas where it went?

I have no idea. No idea.

**David Kestenbaum**

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And then an older woman.

I have never seen a Statue of Liberty disappear the way this one did.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Copperfield, I think in an attempt to land some larger meaning, makes a speech about immigrants and how we shouldn't take our liberty for granted. Then he makes the statue reappear. Even Joe Weisberg-- the non-magic fan-- when he finally watched it as an adult, he was moved. For Joel and me as kid magicians, we tried to figure out how he did it.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Did you have any theories?

**Joel Fields**

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I did not have a good theory. And as somebody who knew a lot of magic gimmicks, I was pretty dumbfounded.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Did your friends say, tell me how he did it?

**Joel Fields**

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I'm sure they did. And I think I would have-- I would like to believe that I told them I didn't know.

## David Kestenbaum

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I'm not proud of this, but when kids asked me how Copperfield did it, I have a pretty clear memory of saying something like, sorry, I can't tell you. Which was true-- I couldn't.

Sometimes, it is not so fun to learn how a trick is done. It's all double lifts and hidden compartments. And when you learn the secret, it can be kind of a letdown. But there are those times when the secret to the trick is cooler than the trick itself-- the sheer ingenuity and genius of it.

And so, I'm going to talk now about how this trick might have been done. We thought a lot about whether to put this on the radio. But the truth is you are all a simple Google search away from what I'm about to tell you. That is one of the weird things about magic today over 30 years later-- the internet exists. There's a whole world of explanations and pretty good instructional videos for aspiring magicians.

But if you'd rather not go down this road with me, you can skip ahead or stop listening for about 10 minutes. I totally respect that.

I should also say we did reach out to David Copperfield. And we made a pitch which was basically this may be your greatest hit. It's been 34 years now. Everyone who was going to be fooled by this trick has already been fooled. You'll never perform it again. Nobody's going to perform it again. We're not hurting the livelihood of any magician by revealing the secret. Why not come on the show and talk about what it was like to be on the other side? Copperfield was completely gracious. But he said, it wasn't his job to talk about how the tricks are done. And he said something else. He said, to protect the secrets of his tricks, he's hired people to put fake explanations online, to throw the curious off the track. Which of course, makes the whole thing even more interesting.

So here is the explanation that is on the internet, and also in one book written by a non-magician-- instead of moving the statue, Copperfield moved the audience. The entire audience. Rotated them, actually. They were sitting unknowingly on a giant rotating platform. Think a huge lazy Susan.

So here's how it would have worked-- the curtain gets hoisted up between the two towers, blocking the statue from view. And while it's up, the platform, with the entire audience on it and the giant scaffolding towers and the curtain, the whole thing rotates until it's facing away from the statue. So that when the curtain falls, the audience is looking out at nothing. Or, I think, to be precise, they're looking out at part of the New Jersey coastline.

It's such a beautiful secret-- smart and simple and big.

There is another part of the secret, which is even cooler. When I first heard there might have been a rotating platform, I wondered, what was to stop the audience members from just turning their heads and seeing the statue? After all, it should have been just off to one side. The answer? It's hidden, in what, in retrospect, is the only possible place-- behind one of the scaffolding towers used to hold the curtain up. The scaffolding tower is tiny compared to the statue. But it's close enough to the audience that with the platform rotated to just the right position, the tower blocks the statue from view.

Watching the TV special again knowing this made it even more impressive. I kept thinking, how exciting and nerve-wracking it must have been to be Copperfield in that moment. To pull this off, the rotation would have been fast enough that it didn't seem to take too long, but not so fast that someone would notice. And super smooth. Here's Joel Fields, former kid magician.

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### **Joel Fields**

First of all, how could the people there not have noticed? It's like high stakes, right? It's ballsy. To put these people on a thing, and like, hope that really no one's going to notice. It's a wildly gutsy trick.

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### **Joe Weisberg**

Well, why? Could it have not worked? What could have gone wrong?

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### **Joel Fields**

One or more people could have said, hey, this platform's rotating. Someone could have had a compass.

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### **David Kestenbaum**

The more I thought about this, the more questions I had. Was this really how it was done? Could you get away with something like that? Maybe this was a fake explanation, planted by David Copperfield. A scaffolding tower to hide some deeper secret.

I figured the best thing would be to track down some of the audience members who were there at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. But remember, this happened in 1983. And in any case, none of the audience members are named. I didn't see any easy way to track them down. But as I was watching and re-watching the video of the trick, I found one shot where someone's name was revealed, someone I could try to contact. It comes in the lead up, where Copperfield is in the office of the Park Service official for the Statue of Liberty. It's just a quick cutaway where he's explaining that he had to get permission to make the statue disappear. But if you freeze frame on that part, you can just make out, on the man's desk, a name plate-- David L Moffitt.

I had no idea if this guy was still alive. This was, after all, 34 years ago. But I started searching for a David L Moffitt. And I found one-- in Virginia, but with a previous residence of Liberty Island.

**David L Moffitt**

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Hi!

**David Kestenbaum**

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I got on a plane to fly down there.

**David L Moffitt**

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--recognized automatically, my driveway's a killer. Sit down and relax.

**David Kestenbaum**

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For 10 years, if you wanted to do anything with the Statue of Liberty, you had to go through David L Moffitt. He lived on the little island with his family. The Park Service has a house there. The statue was right outside his window. He felt like it was his job to protect her.

**David L Moffitt**

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It was also a member of the family.

**David Kestenbaum**

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When a deodorant maker tried to use her in an ad, maybe because she has her arm up, David Moffitt fought back. When a furniture company wanted to hang a couch from her and have someone sit in the couch, he vetoed it. And when David Copperfield requested permission to make her disappear, he said no.

**David L Moffitt**

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I personally felt that was inappropriate use of such a sacred icon. And I wrote back a rejection to the request. And I thought that probably was the end of it.

**David Kestenbaum**

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But a couple of weeks later, Moffitt gets a letter in the mail from the director of the National Park Service, giving Copperfield permission. Copperfield had gone over his head. He had connections in the White House. Copperfield's team did confirm this. They said he got permission directly from Ronald Reagan.

**David L Moffitt**

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To put it mildly, I was a little bit taken back. A few days later, I walked in my office, and there's David Copperfield. He's standing up there. Very handsome, nice looking guy, well-dressed.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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Copperfield apologized for getting him overruled. Moffitt says Copperfield seemed sincere, like a nice guy.

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**David L Moffitt**

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I signed a permit. And then he says that I would like for you to sign a waiver that you will not disclose how I'll make the statue disappear. I said no, I won't do that. I said I would never do anything that would limit my freedom of speech.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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Hard to argue with that while you're at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. Moffitt was there during the filming, and he saw how the trick was done. He says he kept his mouth shut for the last three decades. Only told family and a few friends. But he confirmed for me, the explanation on the internet, that is the real explanation. He even demonstrated for me.

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**David L Moffitt**

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We got the lazy Susan that I use for pottery. That thing. Could you get that? Or I'll get it.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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He had a miniature Statue of Liberty, of course.

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**David L Moffitt**

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Its stage starts turning. And it goes maybe 25 or 30 degrees to the right.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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During the filming, Moffitt was standing just off to the side of the platform. I found another guy who was there, and who confirmed the basic mechanics of how the trick was done. But talking to him made me wonder if there might be a whole other level of deception to the trick. His name is Al Cerullo. His name was in the credits for the show. He flew a helicopter in the Vietnam War. And now, for TV and movies. So many. *The Avengers, Spiderman, Muppets Take Manhattan.*

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**David Kestenbaum**

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The one I want to ask you about was in the 1980s.

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**Al Cerullo**

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That would be probably *Turk 182* or one of those movies?

**David Kestenbaum**

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It was in 1983.

**Al Cerullo**

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Not *Nighthawks*?

**David Kestenbaum**

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It involved the Statue of Liberty.

**Al Cerullo**

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Oh, *Working Girl*.

**David Kestenbaum**

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[LAUGHS] No, when David Copperfield made the Statue of--

**Al Cerullo**

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Oh, David Copperfield! Yeah. Yeah, that was a pretty big deal, actually.

**David Kestenbaum**

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He told me the helicopter's job was to fly from position A to position B while the curtain was blocking the view. Basically from above the statue to above a designated empty spot, which was rigged with duplicate spotlights. If you think about it, the helicopter and the lights are the fixed points in the trick-- the things that make the audience think they're looking at the same spot.

**Al Cerullo**

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I didn't think he was going to be able to pull it off.

**David Kestenbaum**

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How come? Like, what were you worried about happening?

**Al Cerullo**

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You know, the stage-- you'd feel the stage moving or whatever. They spent a lot of money, evidently, on some kind of bearings in the stage. You know? On the bottom, so that you wouldn't feel it. It got delayed a couple of times because it wasn't working right. Couldn't get it to work the way you wanted.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Which put this unpleasant thought in my head-- was the audience really fooled by this? Or were they maybe in on it the whole time?

**Al Cerullo**

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Yes.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Is that right?

**Al Cerullo**

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Yeah. That's-- yes. Some of the people in the audience were staged. They knew what was going to happen.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Oh.

**Al Cerullo**

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Not everybody. I don't think so.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Do you know?

**Al Cerullo**

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No, I don't know about that part of it. We never got into that. I never asked him, he never mentioned it. You know?

**David Kestenbaum**

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I asked David L Moffitt, the Park Service guy. Was the audience in on it? He answered with a story. This happened just after they finished shooting.

**David L Moffitt**

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Everybody was slapping everybody on the back. And everybody a hap, you know. And I said something to one of the so-called audience-- how did you end up here? And she said, oh, I was paid for this.

**David Kestenbaum**

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I was paid to come here?

**David L Moffitt**

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Yeah. And that was kind of the end of the conversation. I was-- I didn't-- that's not what-- I wasn't investigating. I was just curious where these people came from. Especially when they acted so amazed that it had disappeared. Because they felt the stage moving. They couldn't help but feel the stage moving.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Do you think they were all actors?

**Al Cerullo**

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I don't know if they were actors or wannabe ac-- I don't know. I know that one of them was paid to be there.

**David Kestenbaum**

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Moffitt went back over this in his memory, because he wanted to be accurate. He later told us he thinks it was one of his employees who talked to the woman. To be fair, it's been over 30 years.

But this thought, that the audience might have been in on it, it made me incredibly sad. It felt like cheating. If all those people going wow, they were paid to go wow, they weren't fooled? That's not magic. That's like we're watching a play about magic. I told the American producers Joe and Joel about this. Joel, the former kid magician, didn't see it the way I did. At all.

**David Kestenbaum**

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It means he bought off the whole audience.

**Joel Fields**

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No. No! No, it doesn't.

**David Kestenbaum**

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It might mean that.

**Joel Fields**

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It doesn't. Let's say he-- no. The audience was us. The television audience is the audience. He promised to make the Statue of Liberty disappear with no camera tricks. He made the Statue of Liberty disappear with no camera tricks. It's pretty dramatic. And it was moving.

**David Kestenbaum**

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I think it's a little troubling. If true.

**Joel Fields**

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If true.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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I honestly didn't know what to believe. I watched the TV special again and again. And some of the audience members started to look like actors. At least in moments. Like just after the curtain drops and the statue is gone, this one guy leans over to the woman next to him and points in this kind of hokey way. Then there's the fact that one of the audience members is in a priest collar. Really? You happened to get a priest in the audience? And do priests dress that way when they go out at night?

Finally, I got a tip. I was at this magic show talking to these two people. One of them I'll call a former high ranking official in the magic establishment. They knew someone who had been there on Liberty Island during the filming of the show and would know the truth. I called the person up, and he agreed to talk.

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**Ed Alonzo**

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My name is Ed Alonzo. I'm known as the misfit of magic. And maybe you remember me as Max, the owner of the diner on *Saved By The Bell*.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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Ed was also the guy who made that curtain go up and down in front of the Statue of Liberty. Actually, there were two guys. It was a big curtain. Ed was 18 years old at the time, a young magician. Says he stayed overnight at David Copperfield's parents' house in New Jersey before the shoot. I told him I'd heard the audience might have been in on it. I told him what the Park Service guy had told me. That an audience member had said she had been paid to be there.

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**Ed Alonzo**

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Really? See, I'm totally surprised. It is possible that maybe some of the people were paid to be there only because they couldn't get enough regular people with the amount of tickets that they gave out.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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Sometimes you do use paid extras in an audience, he says. They show up on time. And you can tell them to dress nicely.

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**Ed Alonzo**

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But even if they were paid people, they would have not known how the trick was done. There was no reason for anyone to know ahead of time.

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**David Kestenbaum**

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Copperfield's team, by the way, says no audience members were paid. They say the woman who claims she was paid to be there must have been on the production staff. And Ed says an enormous amount of work was done to make sure the trick would fool people. Ed didn't want to talk about or confirm the mechanics of the trick. But he said they did a whole dry run beforehand out in Los Angeles.

The idea to make the Statue of Liberty disappear came from an illusion designer named Jim Steinmeyer. Copperfield's team, with the help of a guy named Don Wayne, added all kinds of improvements and built the stage. As a test, they used it to make the moon disappear. They set the stage up basically in this parking lot.

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### **Ed Alonzo**

Yeah, we were in a parking lot. Because the stage was enormous. David thought that we have to do kind of a demonstration to work out the bugs before we haul this thing to New York.

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### **David Kestenbaum**

A bunch of top magicians in LA sat on the stage. Copperfield made the moon disappear. And everyone gave notes. Tweaks to make it better, so you could fool a real audience. Ed says the night of the filming at the Statue of Liberty, it was clear to him that the people in the audience were fooled. I asked him why in a couple of shots the audience seemed a little fake to me. He had a pretty good explanation, which is that they filmed the trick multiple times. Copperfield's team officially denies this. Ed says it's so, though.

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### **Ed Alonzo**

I think that maybe after we did it about the third or fourth time, some of the people that were sitting on this platform may have had an idea as to what was going on.

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### **David Kestenbaum**

I grilled Ed for an hour about this. And for what it's worth, I believe him when he says the audience was not in on it. Though I do have this tiny sliver of doubt. Which I have to say, I kind of enjoy the feeling of.

David Copperfield told us he was disappointed that we wanted to do our story on a trick that's over 30 years old. He said he had better stuff now, stuff he had just invented that he's totally jazzed about. You need to see it, he said. So Ira and I went to a show in Las Vegas. Copperfield is 60 years old now and doing two or three shows a day. That's just how he rolls. The other year, he did over 600 performances.

The show is not all to my taste, but it was amazing. The work of an obsessive person, driven to keep creating new things. At one point, the lights went out, just for a brief moment. And when they came back on, an enormous flying saucer had appeared, right over our heads. I

mean, huge. It took up a good part of the theater. And it moved like the Millennium Falcon or something, hovering and banking-- the way you imagine flying saucers moving when you were a kid. It was this moment of sheer surprise and delight and joy. I don't care how he did it.

### **Ira Glass**

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David Kestenbaum.

### **Credits**

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#### **Teller**

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It's me using leverage and slack and all sorts of things like that.

### **Ira Glass**

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I'm Ira Glass. Back next week, with more stories of *This American Life*.