

Saving
HOUDINI



MICHAEL REDHILL
THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Martin Sloane*

SAVING HOUDINI

MICHAEL REDHILL

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

For Benjamin and Maxime, brothers

Epigraph

There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship.

— THOMAS AQUINAS

**The Globe and Mail
ADVERTISEMENT
Monday, September 5, 2011**

**THAT GREAT MYSTIFIER
BLOOM THE BEGUILER**

**Begs the attention of his fellow
Torontonians**

**As the abovementioned
ENTERTAINER**

**— he of the nation's
greatest magical family —
WILL MAKE HIS REGULAR
QUINQUENNIAL TORONTO APPEARANCE**

**THIS OCTOBER 31, 2011
AT THE CANON THEATRE 8PM, SHARP**

**WHEREIN HE WILL MARK
THE 85TH ANNIVERSARY OF
HARRY HOUDINI'S DEATH**

**The Globe and Mail
ADVERTISEMENT
Monday, September 5, 2011**

**SEE:
PRODIGIOUS PRESTIDIGITATION
STARTLING SESQUIPEDALIANISM
INSTANCES OF THE INEXPLICABLE**

**ALSO:
FOR ONLY THE SECOND TIME IN NINE DECADES**

**THE SOAP
BUBBLE VANISH**

**This famed effect created by the magician's grandfather
WILL BE PERFORMED**

ONE OF THE GREATEST

**MAGIC TRICKS EVER
ONE NIGHT ONLY!**

Table of Contents

Dedication

Epigraph

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

AUTHOR'S NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

[About the Author](#)
[Praise for Michael Redhill](#)
[Credits](#)
[Copyright](#)
[About the Publisher](#)

1

Not me, not me, not me—

Dashiel Frederic Woolf sat completely still. He didn't look up but he knew they were near. They were coming. Closer and closer. His breath came jagged; his hands clenched into fists in his lap. There was a straining in the air, like a high note.

Not me, not me. Like a chant in his head. He couldn't help himself: he looked up. And someone was standing right beside him. A woman. She wore a satiny black and red dress. And she was pointing directly at him. The Alluring Katie. Just fifteen minutes ago, she'd been sawn in half. Too bad they'd put her back together.

"I think she means you, sweetheart," his mother said.

"I didn't put my hand up!" he growled at his mother. "I'm not going onstage!"

The audience was enthusiastic—three thousand people clapping in unison. "I think they want you to get up, Dash," his dad said. "You'll be great!"

"I'm gonna barf!"

"Well, make it spectacular, then," he said. "Get the whole front row."

Dashiel Woolf stood up. The audience went mad. This is a nightmare, he thought.

An hour earlier, he'd been stuffing wine gums into his mouth without a care in the world. He and his parents had been wandering around the lobby, watching the other theatregoers, reading the names on the signed photographs on the wall. Wine gums were kind of old-timey candies, but they lasted a long time and they came in all these colours. They were chewy too—but not *too* chewy—and the colours actually had different flavours. And unlike chocolate, they didn't melt in your mouth right away. You had to *work* a wine gum.

He'd been gnawing a purple one when a voice came over the sound system.

"Three minutes to curtain."

He looked down at his palm. There were five wine gums left and his mum had told him not to take anything sticky into the theatre. She'd also chosen the supposedly "handsome" suit he was wearing. He felt like he was in one of those boring black and white movies.

"Dash?" said his father with a horrified look on his face. "How many of those did you just put in your mouth?"

“*Fwoo?*” He’d jammed four of the remaining wine gums in.

“I don’t even know why you like those things. They’re not authentic, you know.”

“Come on, we’re going in,” said his mother.

Thank god. His father was about to make a speech about how much better things had been in the past.

The second half of the show was going to be even awesomer than the first. And Bloom was going to do the Soap Bubble Vanish as a big finale. Dash tucked three of the wine gums behind his back teeth.

“They’re more like gummy bears,” his father was saying as they went down the aisle to their seats. “The original Maynards wine gums are sort of leathery. More like jerky than candy. There’s a dusty feeling when you put them in your mouth.”

“Uh-huh,” Dash said, his voice hollowed out by a cheekful of candy.

“You look like a squirrel,” said his father.

“You look old.”

“You smell funny,” said his father, grinning.

The lights were flashing and everyone moved into their seats. A round, white spot hung in the middle of the red curtain, like a full moon. His mum draped her arm over his shoulder.

“In a year’s time,” she whispered into his ear, “you’re going to be a teenager and I’m not going to have to lean over to put my arm around you.”

Each time the magician Joseph Bloom was scheduled to come back to Toronto, tickets would go on sale a year in advance and sell out in less than ten minutes. He toured the world with his show, but he made a point of returning once every five years to his hometown. He’d always do something special for his quinquennial. “Something to keep you another five years,” he’d always say. Somehow, last year, Dash’s mother had snagged four tickets.

The fourth ticket had been for Dash’s best friend Alex, but Alex had moved away in the summer to Holland. Dash hadn’t even known where Holland was, never mind that there was a town in it called *Leiden*. His mum kept bugging him to invite someone else, but what would have been the point? Alex was gone now, and it was Alex’s ticket and no one was going to replace him. They were good tickets too: right on the aisle. Too bad for Alex. He could have stayed in Toronto with his dad instead of moving away with his mum, could have kept going to the same school, and then he’d be here now, in the third row, for the most famous magic trick on the planet.

His loss.

Dash had insisted that the aisle seat be left empty.

He and his parents moved into their own seats just as the auditorium lights faded. He watched the audience settle around him. He finally chewed the purple wine gum. *That's how grapes should taste*, he thought.

"Ladies and gentlemen," bugled a voice, as the moon on the curtain lost the last of its lustre. "Please welcome back to the Canon Theatre stage ... Joseph Bloom: *Bloom the Beguiler!*"

In the olden days, there had been the great *Hs* like Houdini and Howard Thurston, but to Dash, the *Bs* had always been the Best. B for *Bloom*. The beguiling Bloom. And *B* was also for Bloom the Incomparable—the Beguiler's father, who had once eaten a pincushion full of needles and then pulled them out of his mouth with a magnet. And then there was Blumenthal the Believer, Bloom's grandfather. They were one of the most famous magic families of all time, and Bloom still did some of his grandfather's tricks. Blumenthal's signature opening had been to produce a rose from the inside of an empty fist. It would grow out of his hand, thorns and all, to a foot in height.

It had been the grandfather who'd invented the Soap Bubble Vanish. He'd only performed it once, in 1926, and although the trick had made him briefly famous, he retired it, and afterward, according to legend, he wouldn't speak of it. When he passed away, the secret died with him, and the apparatus was lost.

But somehow, Bloom was doing it tonight. How the trick had come into his possession was a mystery. He would only say that he was doing it in honour of his grandfather and to mark the death of Harry Houdini, who had died on Halloween eighty-five years ago this very evening.

Dash watched the second half of the show in a sort of blissed-out trance. Bloom performed The Flying Fish—a terrifying escape. Then a rope trick in which a small length of rope was stretched and thickened until it reached across the stage. Then The Living Marionette, a classic invented by Bloom's father, and She's Beside Herself, in which the Alluring Katie was separated—while standing upright—into two pieces, with the doors to the boxes open the entire time. After a trick with shadows and swords, the stage went dark, and a sharp circle of light appeared on the back wall.

A steel ring rolled out all by itself from the wings and spun to a stop in the middle of the stage.

It was time for the grand finale.

Bloom walked slowly, regally, to the middle of the stage and stood there before them with a little metal wand in his hand. He had changed into a plain grey suit with a silver tie. He picked the ring off the stage and *tinged* all around the inside of it with the metal wand, and the sound of the steel chimed out over them all.

"The circle of life," he began now, holding the ring out to the audience. Flat on, it looked like a washer the size of a manhole. There was a groove in its surface that

made a perfect circle within the ring. “This greatest mystery of all. How we get here, where we go. What life *is*, what forces govern it. I would like to demonstrate to you how deep a mystery it really is. I must warn you, though: this trick is not for the faint-hearted. I save it for last because I suspect you will need time to recover. But in order to do it, I’m going to need a volunteer for ... the *Soap Bubble Vanish*.”

A forest of hands shot upwards in the auditorium and instantly the room was crackle with energy. Dash, his heart pounding, kept his hands tightly in his lap. He was going to be one of only a handful of people ever to see this trick performed. And he had a third-row seat!

The lights came up, and Bloom’s three assistants began walking the aisles on either side, looking left and right, searching for a volunteer.

2

The Alluring Katie held her hand out to him.

He had no choice. He groaned under his breath and rose, and the applause thickened. Then he was in the aisle and walking to the stage.

Katie helped Dash up the steps to where Bloom was standing. Bloom the Beguiler. *In person.*

“You look like you’re being marched to your execution,” Bloom said, and the audience laughed.

Dash wiped the cold sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. His heart was breakdancing.

“What is your name, young man?”

“Dashiel,” he muttered.

“What is that?”

“DASHIEL,” he said louder, and he heard his voice thrown around the auditorium.

“Well, young man, tell me ...” Bloom paused, admiring his volunteer. “Have we met before?”

“Only in a couple of books I’ve read.”

“Oh, so you know *about* me? You know what I can *do* ...” Bloom lifted the ring and looked at Dash through it. Now the audience’s laughter turned nervous. “Are you not a little worried?”

“I’m *very* worried,” Dash said.

The magician turned to the audience looking like he was holding back a laugh. “I see our young friend has done his homework! I assure you, Master Dash, you have no reason to worry. But then again, worry is not a rational thing, is it? Magic is irrational. Maybe you *should* be worried!” He looked out at the audience again and gave them a clownish wink. They roared with laughter. “I can always ask someone else to come up here ...”

“No,” said Dash. He wasn’t going to chicken out in front of thousands of people. “I’ll do it.”

Bloom clapped him on the shoulder and squeezed. “Brilliant! Now, let’s have a look at you.” He pretended to dust Dash off. “Are you going to be vanished with your tie all a mess like that?”

“I ...”

“Now, now,” Bloom said, “let’s look our best for the people. Will someone please fix this poor boy’s tie?”

He gently urged Dash toward the wings, and Dash walked off in a daze, blinded by the light. A flutter of laughter came his way. He could taste lime wine gum at the back of his throat. In the darkness of the wings, a pair of hands reached out to him and began fiddling with his tie.

“There’s a chalk ring on the stage,” a boy’s voice whispered. “Put the steel ring on it, okay? Or you might get bonked with something.”

Dash’s eyes began to adjust and he saw a kid about his age standing in front of him. The boy had a muss of black hair on his head and no clue how to fix a tie. The footlights picked out his blue eyes.

“Your name’s Dash?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, someone left this for you,” the boy said, and he slid a small, white envelope into Dash’s breast pocket. Then, before Dash had a chance to say anything, the boy shoved him back onstage.

“Oh,” said Bloom, seeing the state of his tie now. “We’ll have to fire the wardrobe people, I guess!” Dash glanced back into the wings, but the kid was gone. “Young man,” said Bloom, “will you take this ring from me and place it somewhere on the stage? Anywhere you like.”

Dash took the ring. It wasn’t very heavy, but it was solid. He walked back a few steps. There was a faint chalk circle exactly the circumference of the ring, just as the boy had said. Dash pretended to hesitate, looking around, and Bloom watched him, a tiny flicker of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. Then Dash put the ring down exactly on its mark.

“Now, if you will, take your position *inside* that iron ring.” Dash stepped into it carefully. “Anything unusual?”

“Um, everything?”

The audience laughed.

“Stomp on the floor there. Solid, isn’t it? No trap door?” Dash shook his head. “And now open your arms to show there are no unseen wires anywhere around you.”

Dash spread his arms wide and turned in a slow circle. The room revolved in front of him: the audience, the theatre boxes along the wall ranging upwards like steps. Then the bare backstage, the light intensifying on it. Bloom ... and all those spectators’ eyes.

“Let us continue,” Bloom said. He gestured into the fly space above and something

began to move downwards. A second ring appeared, lowering on cables. It seemed heavier than the first, and Bloom guided it so it didn't hit Dash on the head as it passed around his body to the floor. The upper ring made a smart clacking noise as it came into contact with the lower.

“Are you ready?”

“I guess so.”

“Do you know what is going to happen, young Dashiel?”

“No ...”

“Do you want to hear the truth?” Bloom leaned in and whispered, loudly enough for the audience to hear, “I don't either! But ... that is no reason not to find out!”

He stepped back, lifting his hands. The cables began to draw the ring back up over Dash's body. As they did, a luminous, undulating film rose with the ring. When the film reached the level of his chest, Dash could smell it: it was acrid and soapy. Something in the smell settled his stomach a little, and as the chill of the bubble cooled his face and chest, he felt a calm envelop him. Finally, the ring passed over his head and Dash was looking at the audience through a wavering, impossibly thin, slightly blue screen. It made the faces in front of him sway and shrink and bulge. There were his parents, sitting in the third row, giving him a thumbs-up. Dorks.

And then he was feeling oddly sleepy ... He watched Bloom approach him with a long, polished needle in his hand. The light was bursting everywhere. He listened to Bloom's voice:

“The line that divides life from death is as thin as the bubble that encases young Dashiel tonight. But only in magic can you vanish and ... COME BACK!”

The tip of Bloom's pin touched the soapy membrane of the bubble and colour rushed toward it like something flowing into a hole. The lights were strange and slow, and Dash saw his parents' faces moving away from him. The balcony at the back of the house, a dirty colour now in the shifting light, was spreading wide and thin like taffy. Then it was like he'd just taken off on an airplane and a great rushing sound filled his ears. There was a sudden, hollow *pop*, so big he felt it in his bones.

Then there was nothing. Emptiness above him and below him. He was floating in silence. At some point he had closed his eyes. He felt he could be rising, but then he was falling, slowly, and the stage floor came up to meet his feet. He could hear himself breathing in the hollow silence. It was *really* quiet.

Too quiet.

He opened his right eye half a squint. Through his lashes, he saw seats in the theatre. But they were empty. Rows and rows of empty seats.

He closed the eye. *Okay. Yep. That's not right.*

Maybe there was another theatre in the basement of the Canon. Or he'd spun around a hidden wall into another auditorium. Except he was pretty sure there was only one in this theatre. And this one was identical in every way to the one he'd been watching the show in. It also looked ...

Newer.

He opened both eyes. It was the same place, all right, but Bloom, his assistants, the audience, and even the ring he had been standing in were gone.

Dash leaned over and barfed.

3

“HEY!” came an angry voice.

Dash stood fixed to his spot, rib cage shuddering with fear.

“Hey!” shouted the voice. “Whadya think you’re doin’ up there? How didya get in here anyhow?”

A man wearing a tight black suit and a messy black beard came down the aisle. He didn’t look at all friendly. “You kids coming in here at night these days? Is that what this is? Eh? You kids squeakin’ in through the fence in the parkin’ lot?”

“I don’t know what you mean—”

The man climbed the stairs at the side of the stage, waggling a long flashlight. He shone its hard, white light into Dash’s eyes.

“EH! Whadya do to my stage! You know what one a’ these feels like on the backa yer leg?”

“My parents were just here, sir. I, I was—”

“MARCH! Get your person offa my stage before I leave an imprint on it! By which I mean your PERSON.” He slapped the barrel of the flashlight against his palm.

Dash found his legs and backed away to the edge of the stage. No adult had ever threatened to hit him. Some other kids, maybe, but not adults, and this guy was *for real*. Dash jumped down from the front of the stage and turned around.

“Does your boss know you threaten kids?”

The man’s face went white with rage. He started clomping down the stairs after Dash. “My boss? You wanna talk to my boss? You’re talkin’ to’m right now!”

What in the world was going on? Where were his parents? How did they get everyone out of the theatre so quickly? Dash ran up the aisle to the doors and pushed through them into the lobby—

And stopped in his tracks.

It was different out here. Totally different. The carpeting had changed colour from red to blue, and the concession stand was now on the right. Had he come out another door? He speed-walked over to the candy counter. There was a pack of Maynards under the glass, but it was packaged differently. And beside the wine gums was a package of candy called Adams Black Jack Sucking Candy. He hadn’t seen that during the intermission. Nor had there been any Fox’s Glacier Mints—“In a BOTTLE,” it

said on the label. Since when did they start putting mints into *bottles*?

He was so stunned he could do nothing but turn and stare as the theatre owner came bounding into the lobby, the auditorium doors banging back against the walls.

“Hold on! Just wait!” Dash said, his hands up. “Let me say something!”

“You have two and a half seconds.”

“Is this—?”

“Time’s up!”

“Wait! Hold on! Is this the Canon Theatre?”

“What cannon theatre?” the man snarled.

Dash backed up quickly through the concourse. The doors to the street were still a floor down. He made a run for it, taking the marble steps two at a time. He heard the echo of his pounding footfalls along the tiled hall as he raced to the exits. He rattled a door: locked. He tried the rest of them quickly in succession. Locked. Locked. Locked.

On the other side of the glass, it was peacefully snowing. Dash stared. Something was very wrong with that scene.

He heard the man’s slow, confident step behind him. Dash turned and pressed his back against the doors. The man waggled a ring of keys at him as he crossed in front of Dash and opened a steel case on the wall: a telephone box. He smiled with malicious triumph as he dialled a number. Then, he hung up and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Shouldn’t be long now,” he said. He stared at Dash, enjoying his triumph. The door was cold against his back. Where were his parents? How was he going to get out of this?

The corners of the man’s mouth twitched upwards and he raised his hand toward the doors. “Ah, they’re always around when you need them.”

Dash spun to see a pair of men with huge, fake-looking moustaches approaching the theatre.

The theatre owner grabbed his jacket collar and held Dash tightly against one glass door as he unlocked the other.

“Good evening, Officers,” he said.

Those were police?

“Good evening,” they replied as one.

“I think we have an escapee from the orphanage.”

Dash was pinned inside the circle of men. They smelled like gasoline and leather.

His eyes searched between them, frantic, hunting for a way out.

Beyond, in the street, he saw a big, black, cartoonish-looking car go trundling by. *What the ...* “Where am I?” he yelled, pulling frantically in their clutches.

“That won’t work on us,” replied one of the moustaches. “Which home are you from, boyo?”

“Home? I’m from Toronto!”

“Oh, rah-rah,” said the theatre owner. “He was making a mess on my stage!”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“Come on now,” said the other moustache.

As the policeman’s hand stretched toward him, Dash felt a wave of energy flood his body and his heart began to race, like there was an engine behind his ribs. He pushed himself into one of the policemen and stomped on his foot, hard, hollering at the top of his lungs. The man instinctively shot back, shouting, and let go of Dash, and he made a pencil-dive between them, ramming the door open with his shoulder as he barrelled free. He landed on the sidewalk with a thud, and felt the heavy glass door already closing on his leg. There was no time to think—he bounded up and lurched into the road. Those cartoon cars were everywhere, with their square hoods and huge wheels with wooden spokes.

He ran across the road, dodging the slow-moving vehicles. He heard whistles behind him rise in shrill discord.

On the other side, where the Eaton Centre was supposed to be—where *downtown* was supposed to be!—there were *houses*. Instead of a sparkling mall half a kilometre long, festooned with video screens and bright billboards, there were little red-brick houses with wooden gables. A man stood in a window on the second floor of one of those houses, holding a cat in his arm and smoking a pipe.

Dash crouched between a pair of parked cars stubbed up against the curb at an angle. Made it easier to hide, at least. He could hear angry voices nearby. He poked his head out and looked back at the theatre.

It was the Canon Theatre. At least it was the same building with the same little gargoyles on the front. But the sign on top of the marquee said THE PANTAGES, and on either side were houses and stone buildings faced with columns. He ducked down again and spied through the wheel-spokes as black, gleaming boots went by. They really wanted to catch him, and do whatever people did to an eleven-year-old trespasser here. Wherever *here* was.

He crouched between cars and tried to make himself as small as possible. No wonder Bloom’s grandfather had only done the trick once! Did Bloom know he was going to send Dash into this bizarro world? Was it possible this was *how* the trick worked? He’d read about the black arts, but he didn’t believe in wizards or sorcerers.

This was just a magic trick! It had to be a trick!

It had to be.

He edged into traffic again, behind his pursuers. Almost all the cars had the word *Ford* stuck on their fronts in steel cursive. They weren't like any Fords *he'd* ever seen: they moved in fits and starts, bunched up, and sometimes there'd be a *parp-parp* noise when someone honked their horn. He kept moving. Another noise added itself now to this unreal, too-real world, a deafening blare in the distance that bloomed into a hundred trumpets being blown through the wrong ends—a fire truck. He had to leap aside to avoid being crushed by its giant tires. Five firemen rode standing up in the back.

“OI! You! Stop right there!”

Dash dropped into another gear, running, his legs churning like he was riding his dad's exercise bike on the hardest setting. The intersection in front of him was packed with people. Every last one of them, even the kids, was wearing a hat. He plunged into the crowd, his heart beating so hard it hurt. His lungs began to sting, his chest tightened. The air was freezing in his nose and mouth.

Ahead of him, a streetcar ground on its tracks toward the intersection. It was a grey train with doors at the front and back and a bunch of wooden window frames along its side. There were a lot of people gathered around its back door. Dash swivelled toward the roadway again, but now there were two more policemen running for him, shrieking on their whistles. *Oh god oh god oh god*—he was going to get caught. He heard a voice behind him.

“KID! Hey, kid!”

A man at the rear of the crowd waiting for the streetcar was holding his hand out to him, gesturing furiously.

“Come on! Hurry!”

Dash ran toward him. His legs were going to give out. The man parted the jostling crowd with his hand as a load of passengers descended onto the sidewalk. They were met with a rush of newsboys who closed in behind Dash, blocking the men with the whistles. The newsboys cried something like *Mailnempire!* and *Tyrannosaur, tyrannosaur, one penny!* There were five of them, none older than fourteen, and more stood on crates by the storefronts. One was smoking a cigarette!

“Hurry to the front there,” said the man, pushing him forward. Like everyone else he wore a hat—a plain, grey felt hat, like from the old movies his parents loved—but he had his brim pulled down low over his eyes. “Go on, then,” he said, and Dash whispered a hurried thank you as he passed him and jumped up into the streetcar.

The doors rolled shut and the streetcar began moving. Dash watched through the window as the red-faced policemen blew their whistles in frustration. Above them,