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OBERT DE NIRO TELLS IT like this: A while back, he was at "a place I go"—he won't say where—where some "people I know"—he won't say who—were doing, you know, the things people do when they're with Robert De Niro. At this time,

which the actor says he'll never forget, a kid with a deck of cards and eyes as big as walnuts came up to him and asked: "Wanna see some magic?"

"It was incredible," says De Niro—not a man usually given to gushing, or talking to reporters about anything. But he wants to talk about David Blaine. "It was really amazing. You didn't touch the card or say it—you just picked it out in your head and

ly a few times in his life: at Tatou, once on *Rosie*, recently on *Conan*. "This is the work of the Devil," Conan sidekick Andy Richter declared facetiously as he watched Blaine's tricks. Conan called the magician El Diablo, Mephisto, and Beelzebub.

"People always say that stuff about me," sighs Blaine.

In March the virtually unknown Blaine will appear in his own prime-time ABC magic special. One insider on the show, *David Blaine: Street Magic*, calls the money behind it "insane": unprecedented for any first-timer's show, forget about a magic show. ABC is spending over \$700,000 on the advertising campaign alone, with spots (which start airing this week) directed by Spike Lee. ABC vice-president Stu Bloomberg calls Blaine "the future of magic." His network gave the young magician a million-dollar deal.

"Yeah," says the magician with a little smile. "She'll be good."

Suddenly we're hovering behind her. "Wanna see some magic?"

The Frenchwoman turns abruptly, snorts smoke. "Some *magique*?"

Blaine places a hand in his back pocket: "Yeah."

The Frenchwoman clutches her Prada bag and glances at her male companion. The kid with the eyes and the scruffy goatee is reaching for—

A deck of Bicycle playing cards.

"Think of a card," Blaine instructs. He always sounds as if he has just woken up—as if he couldn't possibly be scheming. It's a strain of what magicians call "misdirection."

People always do what Blaine says.

"Imagine it in your mind," he says. "Tell me the card."

he could guess it. . . ."

"Now I consult him like a medium." De Niro gives a nervous laugh. "Just kidding."

DAVID BLAINE IS STROLLING DOWN SULLIVAN Street on a quiet weekday evening. He is honey-colored, tall, and handsome, with a lingering layer of baby fat that makes him a puppyish 23. He's wearing a T-shirt, low-riding black pants, dime-store sneakers; the look is pre-homeboy, more *West Side Story*. Blaine also has on his mysterious-magician face, which is intensified by a pair of eyes that fans describe as "hypnotic" (*Roseanne*'s Sara Gilbert), "frightening" (Matthew Modine), "weird" (Leonardo DiCaprio).

"The people who know about me," says the hipster-magician with a shrug, "are the people who are supposed to know what's cool."

Blaine has performed professionally on-

But "this is not about money," Blaine is quick to tell you in his deep, drowsy voice. "It's about the people."

This evening, Blaine's out looking for people to amaze. Since he was a small boy in Brooklyn, he has been practicing tricks like this—on the street, in the subway and the parks—prowling after pedestrians and trying to make them think they've witnessed a "miracle."

"The whole purpose of magic is to give to people," Blaine says. He has many mystical-sounding ideas about the art of conjuring. "The whole point is to reach a moment where there is no logic—where everything has been defied, and your defenses are stripped away . . ."

Blaine stops to observe a redheaded Frenchwoman flicking cigarette ashes on the sidewalk. She's shifting heel-to-heel and complaining about having to wait in a long line for Tomoe, a sushi restaurant.

"Eh," says the Frenchwoman, "the queen of diamonds."

"You're sure you want that one?"

"Yes."

"You don't want to change it?"

"No."

"I didn't make you say that?"

"*Non.*"

Blaine stares at her intensely. She's beginning to wonder what this all means—what he sees.

Blaine holds up the pack. The other people in line are watching now.

"I thought you might pick that one," he drones on, "so I turned it over before I came here . . ."

Blaine spreads out the deck. One card is facedown, blue-and-white side showing. The Frenchwoman takes it, turns it over. The sound of her shrieking pierces the twilight air.

"It is voodoo!" she exclaims, holding

up the diamond queen.

Her male friend lifts his backpack off the ground. "Is he going to lift my camera out of my bag?"

Now they all want to know where Blaine comes from, who he is.

"Who *are* you?" the Frenchwoman demands.

But Blaine just smiles and walks away.

He gives me a nudge. "Did you hear her scream?"

"IT'S ALL IN THE MIND," SAYS BLAINE.

He's propped up on pillows, stretched out on the bare wood floor of his new one-bedroom apartment on Gramercy Park. Some 30 packs of Bicycles are strewn around. Flickering gargoyle candles make a musky smell. Peter Gabriel's mystical soundtrack to *The Last Temptation of Christ* is playing.

specifics." The magician yawns and rolls over like an overfed panther. "I like keeping a mystique."

BLAINE'S MYSTIQUE IS NOWHERE MORE POWERFUL than in the celebrity world, where he is already a celebrity.

"People talk about him in hushed tones," says Dick Cavett, who began his own career as a magician at 16. "You've seen David Blaine—wow. It's like having met Garbo."

Blaine, however, is hardly a recluse. His rise began about two and a half years ago, when he started showing up at places like Bowery Bar, Cafe Tabac, Spy, Tunnel—anywhere the stars were out constellating. He says he knew that if he wanted to "take the magic everywhere—to affect the most people," then first he had to show it to the right people.

Blaine's own alleged mob ties: "Mind-blowing magician David Blaine," "squirring around supermodels Bridget Hall and Kat Gould . . ."

By now, Blaine had a ponytailed ICM agent, Jon Podell, and a power publicist, Dan Klores.

But better than management, or even supermodels, he had a myth—or, at least, what Hollywood likes to call "high concept."

He *was* magic.

"He jumps beyond the limits of magic into the realm of ESP," says Matthew Modine.

"Sometimes, I think of him as not human," Leonardo DiCaprio says.

DiCaprio tells it like this: The first time he ever saw Blaine, the magician was levitating. "I was in the other room talking to this girl, and suddenly I heard all these

"Jesus was a magician." Blaine stares luminously through the smoke of his Marlboro Light. "Magic is a way to reveal all mysteries."

We've just eaten a large dinner of sushi ourselves, and Blaine is even slower and more mysterious in a state of digesting. He loves sushi; he ordered things not on the menu, as movie stars do. He knew the chef at the restaurant because he used to do magic there. He says he used to stay alive by accepting tips and meals.

"You can tell what card someone's going to take just by looking at his face, the same way you can tell everything about his life from his face." Blaine's lying on his back now, staring up at the ceiling.

Staring off the wall is a signed photograph of a brooding young Orson Welles, one of Blaine's heroes. I ask him where he got it. But he's already starting to sound like De Niro: "Let's not get into

He'd go up to them and ask, "Wanna see something cool?"

He meant himself, perhaps, as much as his magic. But celebrities—Uma Thurman, Quentin Tarantino, George Clooney, and on and on—were blown away by his magic, by the way the magician seemed to look straight through their careful façades and pick cards right out of their brains. Blaine bit quarters in half and blew them back into place—*whoosh!* Christopher Walken actually got enthusiastic. Oliver Stone fell off his chair. Blaine sent cigarettes sizzling through quarters. Tupac Shakur lay on the floor, laughing uncontrollably. Molly Ringwald said, "Ohmigod!"

Then the New York *Observer's* Candace Bushnell trumpeted Blaine as a "Gen-X Houdini" and "white-hot" "society happening." *Daily News* gossip columnist A. J. Benza started putting the magician in the paper with almost the regularity he ac-

screams. I ran in and saw David in the air. I didn't know what to believe."

DiCaprio allows, "I sort of hated him at first. I thought he was some weirdo cheeseball, like these dorky people who think they're all mystical—a poser. But then I sat and watched him for like an hour, and he did some of the illest tricks I ever saw, and that pissed me off."

Now they're best friends.

Blaine seems to have this way of turning up, magically, when famous folks least expect it and turning them into believers. Natalie Portman—the 15-year-old star of *Beautiful Girls*—tells it like this: Just over a year ago, she met the magician "by chance" on a flight out of Los Angeles. He pulled

out a deck of Bicycles and asked her to pick a card, which she never named out loud. Then, Portman says, Blaine told her to pull up the shade of her window, where her card was stuck *between* two panes of glass.

"It was floating in there. I was screaming, it was so scary. I was freaking out!" Portman says breathlessly. "David made me believe in magic again."

Now they're friends.

And Spike Lee tells it like this: He "happened" to run into Blaine for the first time just as Lee was coming out of the RHIGA Royal Hotel. Blaine popped the question: "Wanna see some magic?"

"I was dumbfounded," says Lee.

So when Blaine later sent him a tape of footage from his TV special and asked Lee to direct the commercials, he was eager to do it. (They'll show Blaine performing, over several weeks slowly revealing his identity. Sort of like a magic trick.) "I know talent when I see it," Lee says, adding, "It's refreshing to see a magician who's not wearing sequins."

"MAGIC TODAY," SAYS BLAINE, PUTTING ON his trademark blue sunglasses, "is all about the wrong stuff. It's about makeup, studios, props, big stages, fancy colors. But the ultimate magic is when there's just a moment—there's no props; it's just you.

"That's what my special's going to be about."

Blaine's special is, in fact, a lot of fun to watch. It's "just him" doing what he has always done—wander through the streets making people laugh, cry, wonder, scream. "Are you from earth?" a white woman on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City demands. "He's not natural," an African-American woman in Times Square flatly tells the camera. Just as Blaine advertises, the show is about "the people"—people of all races and classes and the awe they feel when confronted with the impossible, suspended moments created by Blaine.

But in this sense, the show really is about Blaine.

On a shadowy Gramercy street corner one evening, the magician can't resist performing one last trick before he says good night.

"You got a dollar?" he asks languidly. "Oh, I have one."

He crumples up the bill. Then it's floating above his outstretched palm, as eerily real as Blaine himself standing there being dazzling.

"How'd you do that?" I ask. Blaine hears the question many times a day.

He just chuckles and walks off into the dark.

"THE FLOATING BILL? YEAH, WE HAVE THAT."

John Blake, the vice-president of Tannen's magic store on West 25th Street,

flips through a purple hardcover catalog. The trick costs \$10.

For \$9, you can buy the Cigarette-Thru-Quarter, and for \$25 the Bent, Torn, and Twisted quarter trick, both standards of Blaine's repertoire. Ten dollars, again, will get you the Invisible Deck, the I've-already-turned-your-card-over trick that Blaine performed for the redheaded Frenchwoman.

"That's a great trick," says Blake. "One of the best." It was a favorite, in fact, of Orson Welles, who bought it here 40 years ago.

With over 7,000 items and a wood-working-and-metal shop for special or-

**"Jesus was a magician," says Blaine, staring luminously through the smoke. "Magic is a way to reveal all mysteries."**

ders, Tannen's is the magician's mall. A vast warehouse behind holds such things as the Rabbit Bag, the Deluxe Finger Chopper, and the Bongo Bender, a device for bending keys. Out front, escape jackets, ventriloquists' dummies, colored silks, and old-timey posters of Houdini give the store a backstage, vaudeville feel.

"You get a lot of celebrity magicians," says Tony Spina, Tannen's owner. "Donald Sutherland, Muhammad Ali, Doogie Howser. Woody Allen's a juggler, primarily. He's decent."

Blake saw Blaine come in just last year. "Blue glasses. Nice kid."

"You wanna see a trick?" asks Blake. Benny Goodman music plays. The heavy-lidded, once-dashing former magician stands in the middle of Tannen's, doing the Chinese Linking Rings.

"I DON'T NEED TO BUY MY TRICKS AT STORES. I can do things no magician in the world can do," Blaine says on the phone.

The truth is that all magicians pass through Tannen's—from hobbyists to heavy hitters like Copperfield and Siegfried and Roy. And none of them loves

talking about his visits to the place that shelves books like *I'll Read Your Mind*.

But the question of originality—or of what makes a magician exceptional—seems enough for some magicians to start waxing skeptical about David Blaine.

Blaine is "a real dilemma for all of us," says Stan Allen, publisher of *Magic* magazine. "When we read about him in the papers, reading between the lines, what he's really doing is never on the same level as the reports say."

One veteran magician becomes nearly apoplectic at the name *David Blaine*.

"He hangs out in the whaddyacallit bar and does the same damn tricks over and over," barks the performer, who refuses to be named. "These celebrities don't know anything about magic—they're so susceptible to suggestion. They walk away saying 'I never told him the card!' Well, in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. It's just like Uri Geller—'Look, the key bent in his hands!' It never bent in his hands!"

This magician calls Natalie Portman's story about the card in the plane window apocryphal. "There's no way it was stuck between the windows. Even *Valujet* wouldn't let him stick it inside the god-damn window."

"People," he adds, "are very manipulatable, especially by an expert."

So does that mean David Blaine is some kind of an expert?

PERHAPS, CHARLES REYNOLDS SAYS.

Reynolds has never met Blaine or even seen him work—as few name magicians have—but Reynolds knows magic. He has been a magic consultant for people like Doug Henning and Harry Anderson. He taught Harry Blackstone Jr. how to make elephants disappear.

With his long white hair and a full white beard, Reynolds looks like a cartoon wizard in khakis. His hidden-away house on Grove Street is stuffed with magic books and a collection of original posters of such master magicians as Chung Ling Soo, who keeled over on stage in 1918 when he failed to catch the Flying Bullets.

"What makes a good magician is a combination of things," Reynolds says. "It has to do with personality and showmanship as much as technical skill. You've got to have a spark where the audience relates to you."

Reynolds wanders off to his study and brings back a classic: *Conjuring and Magic* by Robert-Houdin, the granddaddy of modern magic. "A magician is an actor playing the part of a magician," Houdin said in 1868.

"You know," Reynolds says, "it's not easy to make an old trick like the floating bill *believable*."

"I HATE MAGICIANS," SAYS BLAINE IMPATIENTLY. "I hate talking about magic."

## Paying homage: Blaine at Houdini's grave in Machpelah Cemetery, Queens.

me to see them, to impress me with his powers. As if I am not already impressed.

He stops in front of a fruit stand in the shadow of the Flatiron Building. "I need an orange," he says, asking me to pick one out.

"Peel it," he commands.

The skin of the orange appears unbroken. Rolled up inside the natural hollow of the fruit is a card—the eight of diamonds. I chose this card from the magician's deck before we came outside.

A corner of the card is missing. It exactly matches the torn-off corner I hold in my pocket, which Blaine told me to keep after I ripped up my card, on his instruction.

"It's a miracle of miracles!" Blaine says, wide-eyed at his own triumph. "None of the other magicians will know how I did it!"

CHARLES REYNOLDS PADS INTO HIS LIBRARY again. "This now-classic magician's effect," sleight-of-hand master Ricky Jay wrote in his *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women*, "was worked out by [Max] Malini." Malini, a turn-of-the-century conjurer, used to do the trick with ten-dollar bills. "When he was broke and busking in the Bowery," Jay continues, "he theorized that if the borrowed bill was soggy with [orange] juice he would be asked to keep it as a tip."

"Malini," says Reynolds with an affectionate smile, "was the most celebrated mountebank of his time." A heavily accented Polish-Jewish immigrant, Malini became the pampered pet of international high society. Kings and queens, Teddy Roosevelt, John Jacob Astor, Al Capone—they couldn't get enough of him. Malini's rough manner seemed to thrill them as much as his skill as a magician, which was considerable. His response to a woman wanting to know about his show: "Madam, I *am* the show."

Malini was always able to wangle himself fancy accommodations through magic; for a time he lived gratis at San Francisco's St. Francis Hotel. Two years ago, Blaine spent a while living in the Sherry-Netherland. He won't say who paid for the room.

Strangely enough, in a 1995 interview in the *Manhattan Neighborhood Gazette*, Blaine said that "some of my inspiration comes from the [life] of Max Malini." He didn't explain who this was.

"That twist with the corner of the card missing was very good," Reynolds says of Blaine's Malini-like trick. "He's thinking."

"MAGICIANS ARE SOCIAL MISFITS," SAYS JAMY Ian Swiss. He wears a ponytail under his black hat and has an Hercule Poirot mustache. He says, "Magic's full of creepy little subcultures."

Reuben's restaurant on East 38th Street is the (continued on page 87)

We're in Central Park today. "Check out this guy," says Blaine.

A Jamaican man with dreadlocks stuffed up in a multicolored Jiffy Pop hat is sunning himself on a bench.

The man opens his eyes to Blaine standing in front of him.

"Wanna see some magic?"

The man smiles broadly: *Get a load of this kid*. "Yeah, okay."

Blaine does a trick I've seen him do before; called the Ambitious Card, it's another classic bit of close-up magic, wherein the card the subject chooses seems to refuse to stay put in the deck, continually "traveling" back to the top of the deck. A "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" of magic.

Blaine never fails to get the strongest re-

actions from the simplest sort of tricks.

The Jamaican man watches Blaine run the trick and suddenly jumps up like the bench he's sitting on has caught fire. He paces up and down on long, stilty legs.

"Noooo," he says, bending over, laughing. "Noooo."

He pulls up and looks at Blaine.

"You is God, man!"

Blaine smiles. "See ya later."

"Where can I reach you at?"

Blaine turns to go. "You'll see me."

"ONCE YOU START SAYING, 'OH, I CAN'T DO this because somebody else is doing it,' it's all about your ego," Blaine tells me.

But he has also said he can do things that are in no magic book, and he wants

**Blaine** *continued from page 43*

current Saturday-afternoon hangout of a world-famous amateurs' club that has been around at least since the thirties. The magicians sit in the back room. It is badly lit. At tables, about 30 men in windbreakers and sneakers occupy themselves with rubber bands, paper flowers, cards.

Blaine says he would never go to a place like Reuben's.

"Blue glasses," says Doug Edwards, a CPA in checked sneakers. "Nice kid. He started coming here a few years ago, but I haven't seen him in a while."

"He was just learning," he adds. "I showed him how to do the one-hand fan." ("No way," says Blaine.) Edwards fans out his deck like a Kabuki actor. "Some people say I look exactly like Doug Henning," he says.

The guys at Reuben's say that it is also here, several years ago, that Blaine met his mentor, Bill Kalush. Kalush, a produce businessman and investor in his forties, never performs publicly, but he's regarded as a singular card man in the tradition of the great underground magicians of the past. (In the nineteenth century, for example, one Johann Nepomuk Hofzinsler, of Vienna, produced some of magic's greatest tricks, although he showed them to only a select few.) Blaine won't acknowledge a professional relationship with Kalush, saying only that he "thinks I'm talented."

"What do you think of that?" asks a gentleman in his seventies. A Floating Bill—a flat one—hovers above his hand by an almost imperceptible thread. The man is wonderful, with bright, sweet eyes, and doesn't seem the least bit magic.

A balding gent in a snappy blue blazer holds two rubber bands stretched between his fingers and shows how they seem to melt through each other, back and forth. He is Alan "Ace" Greenberg, the chairman and CEO of Bear Stearns. He comes here a lot. He likes magic. He's not bad.

"Nice effect," someone says.

At four, when Reuben's closes, the magicians go outside.

Edwards is carrying a plastic brain in a plastic bag.

"Didn't you go for your operation yet?" asks Lenny Greenfader, a retired motorcycle cop.

A guy in a purple Banana Republic sweater pulls me over. He's Harvey Cohen, the president of Finders, a head-hunting company.

"Hey, look at this." Cohen stands about a yard in front of me on the sidewalk and rises—not jumping—a full foot in the air.

"I used to teach karate," he says after landing. "One day this 10-year-old kid comes into my class and shows it to me."

That kid's name was David Blaine.

"He was some kind of genius kid," Cohen says. "He got the karate school to give him lessons for free."

"OOH, HE LEVITATED ALL RIGHT," SAYS Blaine's doorman on Gramercy Park. "Doormen see a lot—and I've never seen anything like *that*."

Upstairs, Blaine won't levitate for me, and I tell him I don't believe he can do it. "I don't feel like it," he pouts. Instead, he puts his hand on a table (he's wearing long sleeves) and appears to turn it all the way around, clockwise. "Doctors can't figure it out," he says.

"People thought of me as some special child," Blaine offers, reclining again. "They used to stop my mother on the street when I was a baby and just look at me and freak."

He has photographs up now of his mother; he lost her more than two years ago to cancer. She was a dark-haired Faye Dunaway look-alike. The child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, she was a mid-level fashion model and schoolteacher. She struggled to raise Blaine on her own in Brooklyn and then New Jersey after his father left the family when Blaine was 2.

"I'm kind of an orphan," says Blaine.

His apartment has a lot more in it now. There's a fax machine so he can exchange notes with his producer. There are several telephones—regular, cordless, and cellular. There's an exercise machine, and furniture. There's a note on the refrigerator listing all the things Blaine must do every day: "Get up at 7 A.M. Eat healthy. Work. Read . . ." Just like in *The Great Gatsby*.

He shows me one of his favorite books, a biography of Orson Welles. He turns to a marked page and makes me read it: "We can hardly help but realize that the creation of such a legend [his own] is central to the deepest source of his creative power."

"Cards are just a stepping stone," Blaine says, stretching out on his comfy new couch. This year, he reveals, after the airing of the special, he'll appear in a one-man Off Broadway show, now tentatively set for a secret spot in the meatpacking district.

"This'll be a scary show," Blaine says. The eerie effect of his eyes is offset somewhat by his huge feet, in Adidas sneakers.

"Illusions without illusions," he goes on sonorously. "I'm going to completely change my persona. I will be pure evil. Freak everybody out."

He smiles and stands in the arched doorway of his living room, arms outstretched. His fingertips barely touch the wall. His sneakers start to rise. It's a little wobbly, but he keeps going. And going. ■