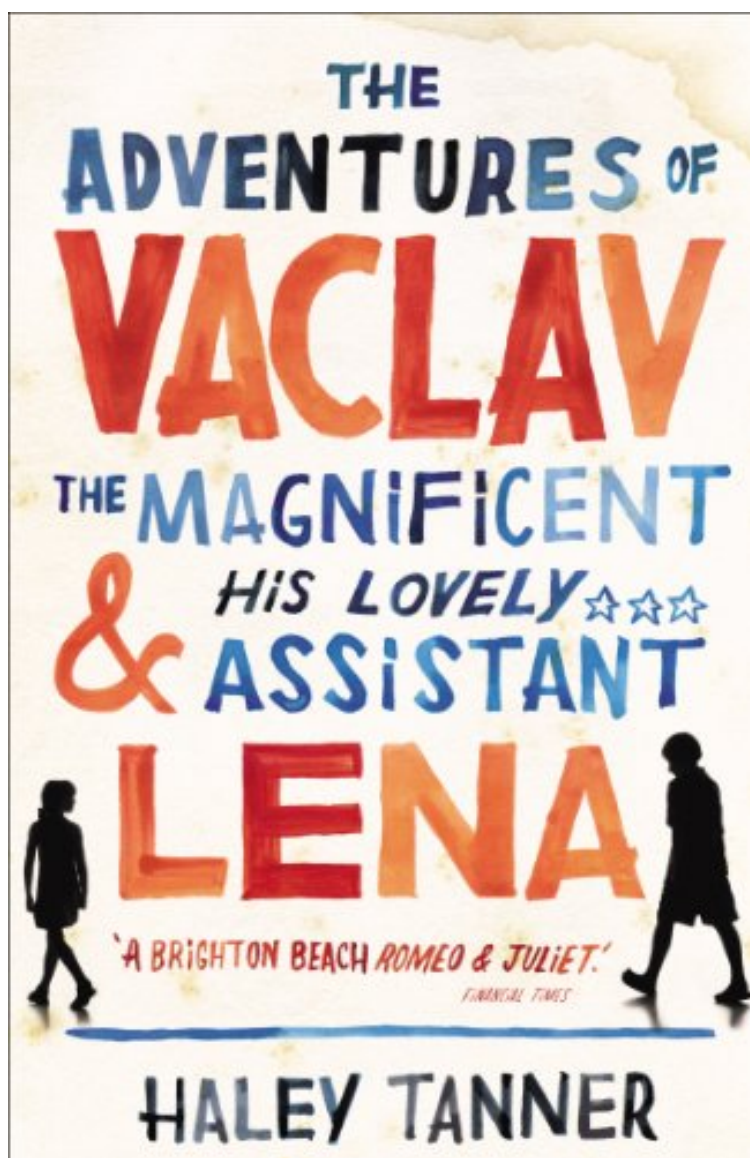


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# The Adventures of Vaclav the Magnificent and his lovely assistant Lena



Par Haley Tanner  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFunny, heartbreaking, rich and wise, this is a story with the power to cast a spell all of its own.Vaclav and Lena seem destined for each other. They first meet as children at their English class in Brooklyn. Vaclav dreams of becoming a famous magician with Lena as his lovely assistant. But then Lena disappears; it seems that life can play cruel tricks too. Vaclav says goodnight to Lena every night for seven years to keep her safe, and then discovers why she was taken from him. Is their connection strong enough to survive the truth, or is happily ever after only an illusion?ExtraitNo Assistant, No Magician "Here, I

practice, and you practice. Ahem. AH-em. I am Vaclav the Magnificent, with birthday on the fourth of December, the famous day for the generations to celebrate and rejoice, a day in the future years eclipsing Christmas and Hannukah and Ramadan and all pagan festivals of that season of winter, born in a land far, far, far, far, far, far, far distance from here, a land of ancient and magnificent secrets, a land of enchanted knowledge passed down from the ages and from the ancients, a land of illusion, (Russia!) born there in Russia and reappearing here, in America, in New York, in Brooklyn, (which is a Borough) near Coney Island, which is a famous place of magic in the great land of opportunity (which is, of course, America) where anyone can become anything, where a hobo today is tomorrow a businessman in a three-pieces-suit, and a businessman yesterday is later this afternoon a hobo, Vaclav the Magnificent, who shall, without no doubt, be ask to perform his mighty feats of enchantment for dukes and presidents and czars and ayatollahs, uniting them all in awe struck and dumb-strucks, and thus, one day in the future years, be heralding a new era (which is a piece of time) of peace on earth. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you, I present to you, I warn you in advance of his arrival so that you may close your eyes or put your hands on your face if you are afraid, Vaclav the Magnificent, Boy-Magician." "Eh," Lena says in a grumbly voice. "Lena, what we are having here is perfect introduction to the act. It is long and perfect and made of only the best and longest thesaurus words," says Vaclav. "After third sentence, say, Magic is art of control events with supernatural powers," says Lena. This sentence is a favorite of Lenas- she memorized it from the Magicians Almanac, which is big old black book with gold all around the edges of the pages, all about magic and tricks and illusions. Vaclav kept checking the Almanac out of the library, so last year for his birthday she put it in her backpack and took it home with her, so that she could give it to him for a birthday present, and it could be theirs forever. "That sounds good, but is not belonging in the act. I already told you. This is the introduction, complete. Seal it now with the magic birthday candle." Vaclav folds the notebook paper on which the introduction to the act is written and he holds it out to Lena. Lena does not take it from him. Lena holds the magic birthday candle in her left hand and rubs its spiraled ridges with her thumb. In her right hand, she holds the lighter with which she is to light the candle. The wax-dripping paper-sealing is an important part of anything Vaclav and Lena write, and it is Lena's job, exclusively Lena's, to light the magic birthday candle, to hold it high, and to then let the wax drip onto the folded paper, sealing it for all of time. Under Vaclav's bed, next to a forgotten sock that, among many gatherings of fuzzy dusty things, is a shoe box full of pieces of notebook paper folded and sealed with Lenas wax drips. The things written on them are important declarations, pacts, lists, and other artifacts of the lives of the young magicians. We write and finish now, Lena, and tonight I will ask permission to have a show." "Impossible," Lena says. "Possible. I can make this happen. Maybe not tonight, but soon. And so we seal the introduction, which means we can begin on the act. Once we have permission, we perform. Light. Melt. It is done." "Unfold. Write. Magic is art of control events using supernatural powers." "I will not, Lena, no. This is not part of the introduction of the act, this does not belong. It is very good English, but it does not belong. This is the introduction, which we must seal, so that it will be, and so that we begin work on practice the act." Lena looks at the lighter she stole from the pocket of The Aunts robe. Lena knows is not right to steal unless you need something really badly, and the person is not home, and wont even realize the thing is missing. Stealing the lighter felt scary, and it felt good, and brave. Lena feels very brave with the lighter in her hand, very grown-up. Why you are the boss always? Lena asks. For one thing I am magician and you are assistant. Assistant is second to magician. There is no assistant without magician, says Vaclav. Without assistant, no magician, says Lena. I am one year older than you, says Vaclav. Ten is only little more than nine-and-three-quarters, says Lena. Magician is more important than assistant, because says Vaclav, getting ready to say one more thing to prove that he should have authority over Lena. He wants to win this argument, even though he knows they will have this argument again. This fight is a fight they have over and over again. It is like the famous argument between the chicken and the egg, about which came first, and which one is more important and better than the other. This fight is never resolved because it is impossible to prove which came first or which is better when actually both things are the same thing. There is a knock on the door. Lena and Vaclav look at the door with wide, terrified eyes. There are three loud knocks, and then the doorknob jiggles, but does not open, because the door is locked. Vaclav is filled with regret. Locking the door was a terrible idea. A locked door indicates to Vaclav's mother that something illicit may be happening in the bedroom of the young magician. "Vaclav! Open the door right now or I'll open it for you! You wantdo this hard way or the easy way?!" Lena and Vaclav shove their magic things under the bed, hide them behind the eyelet-perforated dust-ruffles of the bedskirt. "Coming, coming!" says Vaclav, scrambling to his feet. As soon as Vaclav unlocks the door, it

bursts open, pushing him backward. Rasia's eyes search the room. Rasia doesn't know what she is looking for, but all the time she is worried. Every day at ten-past five she rushes home as fast as she can, because her son is growing and changing every second and she has only so many hours to mold him like clay. She has only so many hours to show him that it is important to do homework, to have dinner like a family, to not do drugs or to steal or to be a lazy person or a cheat. She must protect him from pedophiles, from strangers, from other children at his school who might bully him, from guns, and from carbon monoxide poisoning. She is worried, because he comes home to an empty house after school, he is what they call the latch-key kid, and she is a working mother, and they live in an urban area, and Vaclav attends a crowded public school, and all these things are the ingredients of disaster, if you are listening to the news, which she is, carefully, vigilantly, always to see what next to be afraid of. "I do not like what I see here. What is going on here when I am not home?" "Nothing! We are doing nothing! Homework. We are doing nothing but homework," Vaclav says. "Nothing and homework for three hours? This I do not believe. I want to see all homework after dinnertime." Rasia backs away toward the door, keeping her eyes on Lena. She's worried about Lena because of the well-known occupation of The Aunt. This is unfair and also fair at the same time. Okay, nothing and homework and, also, maybe a little practicing the magic act, Vaclav says. Rasia steps back into the room. Maybe a little practicing the magic act? Actually, yes we are practicing the magic act, Vaclav says trying to look earnest, ...maybe, also, if it is okay with you, because all homework is done, maybe... Vaclav looks up at his mother, and Rasia looks down at her son, at this dancing around what he wants, at his velcro sneakers digging nervous little circles in the carpet. Maybe what? says Rasia. Maybe, before we are eating dinner... says Vaclav. Say what you are saying, says Rasia, narrowing her eyes. Can Lena and I do for you a magic show, in the living room, before dinner? Vaclav says, very fast, all in one breath. All homework is done? she asks. Yes, all is done, Vaclav says, even though his homework is only mostly done. Lena, you are staying for dinner? Rasia asks. "Dah," says Lena. "English!" says Rasia. "Ye-us," says Lena, with a growl. Table must be set before any magic is happening. Homework must be done, Rasia says. Vaclav smiles, because he knows that this is her way of saying yes. Rasia scowls at the room for one extra minute, just to eradicate any funny business that may or may not be happening, then, satisfied, she finally leaves the room, pulling the door almost-shut behind her. As soon as she is gone, Vaclav and Lena jump up and down and squeal with excitement, and then start scrambling frantically to prepare their magnificent act. Lady and Gentleman Vaclav and Lena turn off the big-screen television in the living room. They push the big mahogany coffee table back against the wall; it is a perfect stage, black and solid and shiny. They have moved the coffee table this way many times, it is easy to push across the big threadbare persian rug. Vaclav and Lena stand on stage, waiting for the audience to take their seats. DAD, Vaclav shouts, Come on, were ready! Rasia is already sitting on the big black leather sofa, waiting for the show to start. Vaclav's father comes in with a glass of vodka in his hand and sinks down into the sofa. Okay, so I am here. What are we watching. What are you going to show. Vaclav's father says. Only watch, okay? Vaclav wears his school clothes, jeans and a green-t-shirt, with his bow-tie hanging around his neck and his magicians top hat on his head. Lena wears only her normal clothes, jeans and a sweater, because she has not made her costume yet. First, welcome to my lovely and intellectual audience. Lady, and gentleman, you are in for quite a surprise. I am Vaclav the Magnificent, and this, my assistant, the Lovely Lena, Vaclav swings his left arm out to indicate Lena, who takes a long, deep, serious bow. Vaclav and the audience wait in silence for her to return to an upright position. Tonight we have for you a special treat which will astound and amaze you. May I please, from the audience, give someone the honor of volunteering a quarter to give to me to be involved in a magical trick? This is scam, says Vaclav's father. Dad! says Vaclav. Oleg, give it, growls Rasia, and with much moaning and groaning, he reaches under his butt and into his pocket and retrieves a warm quarter, then hands it to his son. Thank you, kind sir. Much appreciate. Vaclav holds the coin pinched between his forefinger and his thumb, and holds it forward for the audience to inspect. Lena, if you will, the paper. Lena produces a sheet of paper from behind her back. She steps forward to the front of the stage, and shows the audience the front of the paper, the back of the paper, and the edges of the paper. She holds the sheet of paper up to the light, then she steps back. As my lovely assistant is showing this is a normal piece of paper - no holes or rips or no tears. This is just a normal paper. Thank you Lena. Lena nods. Please watch carefully. I am now folding the paper around the coin. Vaclav folds the paper several times, so that the coin is contained within it, as in an envelope. Rasia scoots a bit forward on the couch, following her son's direction to watch carefully. Oleg crosses his arms. Oleg has sleeping marks like deep scars on his face and neck, and hairs bursting out of the top of his shirt. You can see that the coin is completely sealed within

the paper. Lena steps next to Vaclav, and extends her hands sideways to draw the audiences attention here, to the mysterious coin-wrapped-in-paper. Focusing carefully, Vaclav passes the paper-wrapped coin from his left to his right hand. He doesnt explain this movement. Lena puts her arms stiffly up in the air and twirls around and around, coming dangerously close to the edge of the coffee table. Rasia gasps, afraid for Lena to fall. Using my magic wand, I will now make the coin disappear from thin air, Vaclav says, holding the coin-packet stiffly in his right hand, and nervously slipping his left hand into his back pocket. Lena attempts to shimmy, twitching her bony shoulders back and forth. Vaclav keeps his hand in his pocket for a moment of Lenas shimmying, and then removes it, smiling, and shows the audience his magic wand. Vaclavs magic wand is one of his most special things. It is a real magic wand, from the magicians supply shop in Manhattan. His mother took him, and they had to ride on the subway for more than an hour to get there, and they had to transfer twice. At the store, they asked the shop owner for help picking out the best wand, and afterward, they had lunch at a restaurant, and Vaclav held it in his lap the entire time. Vaclav taps this very wand three times on the paper packet. Abracadabra! he says, with the final tap, The coin has disappeared! Lena, he says, my lovely assistant, if you would be kind, please take this paper envelope and tear it into two complete pieces. Lena takes the paper packet from him, and effortlessly tears the paper in two. She then shows the paper pieces to the audience, and once the audience has seen sufficient evidence of the disappearance of the quarter, she throws the pieces of paper up into the air, for dramatic effect. Vaclav and Lena bow, so that the audience knows to begin clapping. Fantastic! Says Rasia, although she is not sure which part of the trick was the trick. She is almost certain that she was not supposed to see Vaclav tip the coin out of the paper packet and into his open hand, and that she was not supposed to see him put the coin into his pocket when he went to take out the wand.. Vaclav and Lina bow again. Bravo! says Rasia. Vaclav and Lena step down from the coffee table. Where is my quarter, says Oleg. A magician never reveals the secrets, says Vaclav. Oleg, says Rasia to his father, meaning, do not ask about the quarter again. Thank you, says Vaclav, I am glad you like. Lena and I will perform this on Saturday for fans at the boardwalk of Coney Island. Vaclav is beaming. Vaclav, Rasia takes a deep breath. Shes been trying to ignore this idea of a performance at Coney Island, but Vaclav wont forget. Hes too persistant. He doesnt know that this is a very bad idea. This is not such a good idea, she says. Why? asks Vaclav. It just is not. How can she tell him the truth? She cant tell him that the drunks and the teenagers at Coney Island will laugh at him. She cant tell him that he will humiliate himself. She cant tell him that no one will clap, that no one will do ooh and aah. Why? asks Vaclav. It is not safe. This is maybe close to being honest, she thinks. It is not safe, for Vaclav, out in the world, with his eyes open to everything and his heart beating right on his sleeve, with his dreams in his hands, ready to show and tell. Thats not fair! We must practice to do the show for a REAL audience! he yells. This is fine, she tells herself, to let him think she is being the meanest person in the world. Let him think that she does not want him to perform his magic. That is the final word. I will not discuss, she says. I cannot believe! says Vaclav. Go wash your hands and get ready for dinner, she says. Lena, you too. Rasia stands at the door as Vaclav and Lena march toward a dinner which is not the thing they are hungry for. From the Hardcover edition. Revue de presse "Haley Tanner has created a world peopled with characters of great poignancy and they will linger in the mind - and heart - long after the book is put down." (Elizabeth Strout, Pulitzer Prize winning author of Olive Kitteridge) "Vaclav and Lena is a wonderful achievement, generous, playful, moving, and refreshing. It was the voice that first captivated me here, a voice that allows Haley Tanner to say anything at all, and to say it truly. Give this novel a few short pages, and I guarantee you'll want to read it to the end." (Kevin Brockmeier, author of The View from the Seventh Layer and The Brief History of the Dead) "There are books you enjoy, and then there are books you live in. Haley Tanner plunges you into the Russian migr community in Brooklyn, where two souls connect under a maternal watchful eye. Tanner's assured narrative voice finds new ways to describe emotion and character, bringing the reader up short again and again with small shocks of awareness. This book is sad, funny, true, and shot through with grace." (Judy Blundell, National Book Award winning author of What I Saw and How I Lied) "[A] wonderful and wrenching debut novel... Whimsical love stories are tough to pull off. But vibrant characters, believably romance and dark undertones make for a moving tale... Ms. Tanner is such a strong storyteller, and her distinctive voice - winsome without being dopey - engulfs you immediately... There are two love stories in this book: the one between the boy and the girl, and the one between the mother and the son... Many an author has relied on the redemptive power of love as the ultimate fixer. Too often its capacity to heal is taken for granted. Ms. Tanner reserves the abracadabra for Vaclav's routines. She shows what love can do and also what it cannot. But that's not to say that Ms. Tanner isn't a romantic. She offers a case of love so mighty that

you believe that it will end up rescuing a traumatized young woman." (New York Times)"Vaclav and Lena meet as small children at an English class in Brooklyn. They have come from Russia during the aftermath of glasnost. At the age of 10 Vaclav has set his heart on becoming a famous magician and performing on the boardwalk at Coney Island, with Lena as his lovely assistant. He already knows that he will marry Lena some day. Tanner infuses their relationship with sunlight but never sentimentalises the immigrant experience. Vaclav's father is an architect who drives a cab and drinks vodka. The warmth in his house is generated by his mother, Rasia, who quietly feeds her son's little friend. Lena feels safe only with Vaclav and his family. Her parents are in Russia and she lives with her mostly absent aunt. One day Lena does not come to school and Vaclav spends the next seven years waiting for her. A uniquely charming first novel."

(Kate Saunders The Times)