## The Stuff that Dreams Are Made Of

## Tad Williams

Okay, I admit it. If a guy wants to get drunk in the middle of a weekday afternoon, he should have a lock on his office door. Usually Tilly runs interference for me, but this day of all days she’d left early to take her mother in to have her braces loosened. (Retired ladies who get a yen for late-life orthodonture give me a pain anyway—I told Tilly her mom’s gums were too weak for such foolishness, but who listens to me?)

Anyway, Tilly is usually out there behind the reception desk to protect me. I don’t pay her all that much, but somehow, despite the fairly small difference in our ages, I bring out some grumpy but stalwart mother-bear reflex in her. Actually, that describes her pretty well: any bill collector who’s ever seen an angry Tilly come out from behind her desk, her bulky cable knit sweater and long polished nails suggesting a she-grizzly charging out of a cave, will know exactly what I mean. If Tilly moved in with Smokey the Bear, every forest arsonist in the country would move to Mexico.

Sadly, there was no lock, and for once no Tilly to play whatsisname at the bridge. Thus the fairly attractive blonde woman, finding the door to my inner office open, wandered in and discovered me in a more or less horizontal position on the carpet.

I stared at her ankles for a moment or two. They were perfectly nice ankles, but because of all the blood that had run to one side of my head, I wasn’t really in optimum viewing mood.

“Um,” I said at last. “’Scuse me. I’m just looking for a contact lens.” I would have been more convincing if my face hadn’t been pressed too closely against the carpet to locate anything on a larger scale than the subatomic.

“And I’m looking for Dalton Pinnard,” she said. “Otherwise known as ‘Pinardo the Magnificent.’ See anybody by that name down there among the contact lenses?” She had a voice that, while not harsh, was perfectly designed to make ten-year-old boys goofing in the back of a classroom cringe. Or to make drunken magicians feel like brewery-vat scum. If she wasn’t a teacher, she’d missed her calling.

“I have a note from a doctor that says I’m allergic to sarcasm,” I growled. “If you don’t want a whopping lawsuit on your hands, you’d better leave.” Admittedly, I was still at a slight conversational disadvantage—this riposte would have been more telling if it hadn’t been spoken through a mouthful of carpet fuzz—but how can you expect someone who’s just finished off his tenth Rolling Rock to be both witty and vertical?

“I’m not going to go away, Mister Pinnard. I’m here about something very important, so you might as well just stop these shenanigans.”

I winced. Only a woman who thinks that two pink gins at an educational conference buffet evening constitutes wild living would dismiss something of the profound masculine significance of a solo drunk as “shenanigans.” However, she had already ruined my mood, so I began the somewhat complicated process of getting into my chair.

I made it without too much trouble—I’d be saying a permanent goodbye to the office soon anyway, so what difference did a few spilled ashtrays make? I was buoyed slightly by the knowledge that, however irritating this woman might be right now, at least she wouldn’t be around for the hangover. Not that she was unpleasant to look at. Except for a slightly sour look around the mouth (which turned out to be temporary) and a pair of glasses that belonged on one of those old women who wears garden gloves to play the slot machines, she looked pretty damn good. She had a slight tendency to go in and out of focus, but I suspected that might have something to do with what I’d had for lunch.

“Well,” I said brightly once I had achieved an upright position. I paused to scrabble beside the chair rollers for one of the cigarette butts that still had a good amount of white left on it. “Well, well, well. What can I do for you, Miss...?”

“It’s Ms., first of all. Ms. Emily Heltenbocker. And I’m increasingly less sure that you can do anything for me at all. But my father sent me to you, and I’m taking him at his word. For about another forty-five seconds, anyway.”

I hadn’t managed to get my lighter going in three tries, so I set it down in a way that suggested I had merely been gauging the length of spark for some perfectly normal scientific purpose. “Heltenbocker...? Wasn’t that Charlie Helton’s real name?”

“I’m his daughter.”

“Oh.” Something kicked a little inside me. In all the years I knew Charlie, I had never met his only child, who had been raised by her mother after she and Charlie divorced. It was too bad we were finally meeting when I was...well, like I was at the moment. “I heard about your dad last week. I’m really sorry. He was a great guy.”

“He was. I miss him very much.” She didn’t unfreeze, but she did lower herself into the chair opposite me, showing a bit more leg than one expected from a schoolteacher-type, which inspired me to assay the cigarette lighter again. “Oh, for God’s sake,” she said at last, then pulled a lighter out of her purse and set it blazing under my nose. Half the foreshortened cigarette disappeared on my first draw as she dropped the lighter back in her bag. Emily Heltenbocker struck me as the kind of woman who might tie your shoes for you if you fumbled at the laces too long.

“So...Charlie sent you to me?” I leaned back and managed finally to merge the two Ms. Heltenbockers into one, which made for more effective conversation. She had a rather nice face, actually, with a strong nose and good cheekbones. “Did you want to book me for the memorial service or something? I’d be honored. I’m sure I could put together a little tribute of some kind.” Actually, I was trying desperately to decide which of the tricks I did at the children’s parties which constituted most of my business would be least embarrassing to perform in front of a gathering of my fellow professionals. I couldn’t picture the leading lights of the magic world getting too worked up about balloon animals.

“No, it’s not for the memorial service. We’ve already had that, just for the family. I want to talk to you about something else. Did you hear what happened to him?”

I couldn’t think of any immediate response except to nod. In fact, it was despondency over Charlie’s passing, and the awareness of mortality that comes with such things, that had been a large part of the reason for my little afternoon session. (Maybe not as large a part as the foreclosure notice on the office I had received that morning, but it had certainly fueled my melancholy.)

What can you say about an old friend for whom the Basket and Sabers Trick went so dreadfully wrong? That, at a time when he was down on his luck financially, and on a day when he happened to be practicing without an assistant, it looks a little like your old friend may have been a suicide? Of course, a honed steel saber sounds more like a murder weapon than a tool for self-slaughter, and most people don’t choose to bow out inside a four-foot rattan hamper, but the door to his workroom was locked, and the only key was in Charlie’s blood-soaked pocket. According to the respectable papers, he was working inside the basket and somehow must have turned the wrong way: the sharp blade had sliced his carotid artery, just beneath the ear. “Accident” was the verdict most of them came up with, and the police (perhaps tactfully) agreed. Some of the lower-rent tabloids did hint at suicide, and ran lurid pictures of the crime scene under headlines like “The Final Trick!” and “Basket of Blood!”

(I would heap even more scorn on such journals except my most recent interview—only two years before—had been courtesy of Astrology and Detective Gazette, which shows they are not entirely without discernment.)

“Yeah, I read about it,” I said at last. “I was really shaken up. A horrible accident.”

“It was murder.” Phone-the-time ladies announce the hour with less certainty.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Murder.” She reached into her bag, but this time she didn’t produce a lighter. The envelope hit my desk with the loud smack of a card trick going wrong. “I went to see the lawyer yesterday. I expected Dad to be broke.”

I was suddenly interested. She was here to hire me for something, even if I didn’t know what. “And you were wrong?”

“No, I was exactly right. His net assets are a few hundred moth-eaten magic books, some tattered posters, a few old props, and an overdue bill for rental of his top hat. And that envelope. But I expected to receive something else too, and I didn’t get it.”

I was already reaching for the envelope. She stilled me with a glance. Yeah, just like they say in books. And if any of you has ever received a note in class illustrated with a dirty cartoon of your teacher and looked up to find her standing over you, you’ll know what I mean. Real rabbit-in-the-headlights stuff. “Uh, you...you said you didn’t get something you expected?”

“Dad had been writing his memoirs for years. He wouldn’t let me read them, but I saw the manuscript lots of times. When I didn’t find it around the house after...after...” For a brief moment her composure slipped. I looked away, half out of sympathy, half to escape the momentarily suspended gorgon stare. She cleared her throat. “When I couldn’t find it, I assumed he’d given it to his lawyer for safekeeping. He’d fired his agent years earlier, and he doesn’t talk to Mom, so it couldn’t be with anyone else. But the lawyer didn’t know anything about it. It’s just...vanished. And here’s the suspicious part—there was a lot of interest in that manuscript, especially from some of Dad’s rivals in the business. They were concerned that he might tell some tales they’d rather weren’t made public.”

I straightened up. Repeated doses of her sit-up-properly-class voice were beginning to take a toll on my natural slouch; also, the effects of my liquid lunch were wearing off. “Listen, Ms. Heltenbocker, I’m not a cop, but that doesn’t seem like grounds enough to suspect murder.”

“I know you’re not a cop. You’re an out-of-work magician. Look in the envelope.”

“Hey. I have a nice little thing going with birthdays and bar mitzvahs, you know.”

That sort of defensive thrust works best when followed by a quick retreat, so I picked up the envelope. It had her name on it, written in an old man’s shaky hand. The only thing inside was an old photograph: two rows of young men, all dressed in top hats and tailcoats, with a placard in front of them reading: “Savini’s Magic Academy, Class of ’48.” Three of the faces had been circled in ink. None of the three was Charlie himself; I discovered him smiling in the front row, looking like a young farm boy fresh off the bus. Which in 1948, as I recalled, he pretty much would have been.

“This doesn’t mean anything to me,” I said. “How could it? I wasn’t even born.”

“Look on the back.”

On the flip-side of the photo, that same shaky hand had scrawled across the top: “If something happens to me or my book, investigate these three.” At the bottom, also in ink but kind of faint, the same person had written: “Trust Pinardo.”

“Yes, it’s all my dad’s handwriting. It took me a while to find out who ‘Pinardo’ was and to track you down. Apparently, you haven’t been playing many of the big venues lately.” She smiled, but I’ve seen more warmth from Chevrolet grillwork. “So far my dad’s judgement looks pretty awful, but I’m willing to give you a chance for his sake. I still think it’s murder, and I do need assistance.”

I shook my head. “Okay, your father was a friend, but we hadn’t seen each other for a long time. Even granting that it’s a murder, only for the sake of argument, what do you—what did he—expect me to do, for Chrissakes?”

“Help me. My father suspected something about these three men who all went to the magic academy with him. His book has disappeared. I’m going to confront them, but I need somebody who understands this world.” The facade slipped again and I found myself watching her face move. The human woman underneath that do-it-yourself Sternness Kit was really quite appealing. “My mom and dad split up when I was little. I didn’t grow up with him, I don’t know anything about stage magic. I’m a teacher, for goodness sake!”

“Aha!” I said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Nothing, really.” I pondered. “Okay. I don’t buy any of this, but I’ll do what I can. Charlie was a good guy and he was there for me when I was starting out. I suppose that whatever I have, I owe to him.”

“Hmmm,” she said. “Maybe I trusted you too fast. You’ve certainly got a pretty good murder motive right there.”

“Very funny. We’d better discuss my fee, because as it turns out, I can help you already. I’ve just recognized one of these guys.” Quite pleased with myself, I pointed at a thin young man with a thin young mustache standing in the back row. “His name is Fabrizio Ivone, and he’s working tonight at the Rabbit Club.”

My none-too-sumptuous personal quarters are a suite of rooms—well, if a studio with a kitchenette and bathroom constitutes a suite—over my place of business. Thus, it was easy enough to grab a bite to eat and a couple hours’ sleep, then shower and get back downstairs well before Ms. Heltenbocker returned to pick me up. If my head was starting to feel like someone was conducting folk-dancing classes inside it, I suppose that was nobody’s fault but my own.

Tilly was again holding down the front desk, eating a take-out egg foo yung and going over the books. She was frowning, and no surprise: matching my income against my outgo was like trying to mend the Titanic with chewing gum and masking tape.

“Hey, you were supposed to have the day off.” I scrabbled in the filing cabinet for the aspirin. “How’s your mom?”

Tilly gave me one of her looks. She’d probably noticed the pyramid of beer bottles I’d made on my desk. “If I stayed away from here a whole day, this place would just disappear under the dust like Pompeii. Mom’s fine. Her gums are still sore. I’ve been overheating the blender making her milkshakes all afternoon.” She paused to contemplate a noodle that had fallen onto her sweater, where it lay like a python that had died climbing Everest. “By the way, who the hell is Emily Heltenbocker?”

“Client.” I said it casually, although it was a word that had not been uttered within those walls for some time. “Also Charlie Helton’s daughter. Why?”

“She left a message for you. Poor old Charlie—that was a real shame. Anyway, she says she’ll be here at seven, and you should wear a clean shirt.”

I did not dignify this with a reply.

“Oh, and two different reporters called—someone from The Metropolitan, and a guy from Defective Astronomer Gazette.”

“Astrology and Detective,” I said absently, wondering what could have made me the center of such a media whirlwind. The Metropolitan was actually a rather high-toned organ: they only printed their car-accident pictures in black and white, and they ran tiny disclaimers underneath the alien abduction stories. I swallowed a few more aspirin and went to meet the press.

A couple of quick calls revealed that both had contacted me about the Charlie Helton Mystery, aka “The Magical Murder Manuscript.” Apparently the missing book angle had been leaked by Charlie’s lawyer and was developing into a fair bit of tabloid froth. Some hack from The Scrutinizer called while I was still working my way through the first two. By the time I had finished my bout of semi-official spokesmanship—not forgetting to remind them all that Pinnard was spelled with two “n”s, but Pinardo (as in “the Magnificent”) with only one—Tilly leaned in the door to tell me “my date” was waiting.

(There is a certain hideous inevitability to what happens when Tilly meets one of my female clients, at least if that client is under sixty years of age. It is useless to protest that I have no romantic interest in them—Tilly only takes this as evidence of my hopelessly self-deluding nature. As far as she’s concerned, any roughly nubile woman who has even the most cursory business relationship with me falls into one of two categories: shallow gold-diggers prospecting in my admittedly rather tapped-out soil, or blindingly out-of-my-league “classy ladies” over whom I am fated to make a dribbling fool of myself. Only the sheer lack of recent clients of any sort had caused me to forget this, otherwise I would have been sure to meet Charlie’s daughter downstairs in front of the laundromat, at whatever cost to dignity.)

All unknowing, Emily Heltenbocker had greatly increased the likelihood of such a reaction by wearing a rather touchingly out-of-date cocktail frock for our nightclub sojourn. The black dress showed an interesting but not immodest amount of cleavage, so Tilly had immediately sized her up as a Number One.

“I’ll just stick around for a while to keep out the repossession people,” she informed me helpfully as I emerged. “Don’t worry, boss. I won’t let them take that urn with your mother’s ashes like they did last time you went bust.” She turned to Emily. “Call me sentimental, but I think however far in debt someone is, those loan sharks should stick to reclaiming furniture, not late relations.”

I winced, not so much at the all-too-true reference to my financial state as at the unfortunate subject of dead relatives, but Emily appeared to take no notice of my assistant’s faux pas. “What a loyal employee,” she cooed. I thought I detected a touch of acid beneath the sweetness. “She’s clearly been with the firm forever. Well, she should still get back in time for Ovaltine and the evening news—even if the repo men drop by tonight, it shouldn’t take them long to collect this lot.”

Tilly raised an eyebrow in grudging approval—she liked an opponent who could return serve. Before some thundering new volley was delivered, I grabbed Emily’s arm and pulled her toward the stairs.

Did I mention that there’s been a slight problem with the elevator lately?

“At least the shirt looks like it was ironed at some point,” she said. “Mid-seventies, maybe?”

She was driving. Her style refuted my ideas of what a schoolteacher would be like behind the wheel, and in fact rather enlarged the general concept of “driving.” Apparently, many of the other motorists felt the same: we had traveled across town through an 1812 Overture of honking horns, squealing brakes, and occasional vivid remarks loud enough to be heard even through our rolled-up windows.

I chose to ignore her comment about my shirt and concentrated instead on clinging to my seat with one hand while using the other to leaf through the autopsy report which Emily had somehow procured. (Privately, I suspected a coroner’s clerk with guilty schoolboy memories.)

Nothing in the report seemed to differ greatly from what I had read in the papers. Karl Marius Heltenbocker, aka Charlie Helton, had been in his early sixties but in good physical health. Death was due to exsanguination, the agent of same having been a large and very sharp steel sword of the type known as a cavalry saber. A few rough drawings showed the position of the body as it had been found inside the basket, and a note confirmed that paramedics had declared the victim dead at the scene. The verdict was death by misadventure, and both autopsy and summary report were signed by George Bridgewater, the county’s coroner-in-chief. If anyone in authority suspected it was a murder, it certainly wasn’t reflected in the official paperwork.

“It sure looks like an accident,” I said, wincing slightly as a pedestrian did a credible Baryshnikov impression in his haste to give Emily right-of-way through a crosswalk.

“Of course it does. If you were going to murder someone and steal his manuscript to protect yourself, Mister Pinnard, wouldn’t you want it to look like an accident?” She said this with an air of such logical certainty that I was reminded of my firm conviction during my student years that all teachers were extraterrestrials.

“How fiendishly clever,” I replied. I admit I said it quietly. I was saving my wittier ripostes until there was pavement under my feet again.

I hadn’t been to the Rabbit Club in a while, and was faintly depressed at the changes. I suppose on the salary the school board forked out Emily didn’t get out much, because she seemed quite taken with the place. Actually, set against the rather faded glories of the club—its heyday had roughly paralleled that of the Brooklyn Dodgers—she looked far more natural than me in my leather jacket and jeans. With her strapless cocktail dress and horn-rimmed glasses, she might have been sent over by Central Casting.

As I mused, she said something I didn’t quite catch, and I realized I had stopped in the middle of the aisle to admire her shoulders (I have always been a sucker for a faint dusting of freckles). I hurried her toward a booth.

The show was not the sort to make anyone sit up in wonder, but the club was one of the few places left in town where young magic talent could get a start. Looking around the darkened room, I felt a certain nostalgia for my own rookie days. Over the following hour we watched a succession of inexperienced prestidigitators fumble bouquets out of their sleeves and make coins jump across the backs of their hands while hardly ever dropping them. I nursed a soda water—rewarded for my choice with a restrained smile from my companion—but Emily drank two and a half glasses of champagne and applauded vigorously for one of the least sterling examples of the Floating Rings I’d ever seen. I decided sourly that the young (and rather irritatingly well-built) magician’s no-shirt-under-the-tux outfit had influenced her appreciation.

After the break, during which the tiny house band wheezed through a couple of Glenn Miller numbers, Fabrizio Ivone was announced. The headliner had not changed much since the last time I’d seen him. He was a little older, of course, but aren’t we all? His patter was delivered with a certain old-world formality, and his slicked-down hair and tiny mustache made him seem a remnant of the previous century. Watching him work his effortless way through a good group of standard illusions, it was easy to forget we were living in an era of jumbo jets and computers and special effects movies. When he finished by producing a white dove from a flaming Chinese lacquer box, the smallish crowd gave him an enthusiastic ovation.

I took Emily backstage on my arm (at this point she was a wee bit unsteady on her pins) and quickly located the dressing room. Ivone was putting his brilliantined hair, or at least the part that wasn’t real, back in its box.

“The world of Illusion,” said Emily, and giggled. I squeezed her wrist hard.

“That was a splendid show, Mister Ivone. I don’t know if you remember me—we worked a bill together in Vegas about ten years ago, at the Dunes I think it was. Dalton Pinnard—Pinardo the Magnificent?”

“Ah, of course.” He looked me up and down and went back to taking off his makeup. He didn’t look like he cared much one way or the other.

“And this is my friend, Emily Heltenbocker.” I took a breath and decided to go for the direct approach. “Her father was Charlie Helton.”

A plucked eyebrow crept up that eggshell dome of a forehead. “Ah. I was sad to hear about him.” He sounded about as sorry as he’d seemed glad to see me again.

“We were wondering if you might know anything about the book he was writing,” said Emily. “Somebody stole it.” She gifted Ivone with a dazzling smile. It was a good smile, but I couldn’t match it since I was wincing at her sledgehammer approach.

The old magician gave her a look he probably used more often on sidewalk dog surprises. “I heard it was full of slanders. I am not unhappy to hear it has been stolen, if that were to be the end of it, but I have no doubt it will soon appear in the gutter press. If you are asking me if I know anything about this sordid affair, the answer is no. If you are insinuating I had anything to do with the theft, then you will be speaking to my lawyer.”

I trod ever so gently on Emily’s foot, preparing to steer the conversation in a friendlier direction. My new initiative was delayed somewhat by the wicked elbow she gave me back in the solar plexus. When I could breathe again, I said: “No, Mister Ivone, we don’t think any such thing. We were just hoping that you might be able to tell us anything you know about Charlie’s relationship with other magicians. You know, so we can decide once and for all if there’s anything sinister in the disappearance. But you, sir, are of course above suspicion.”

He stared at me for a moment and I wondered if I’d overdone it. The cold cream was caked in his wizened features like a bad plastering job. “I would never harm anyone,” he said at last, “but I must say that I did not like your father, young woman. Even in the Savini Academy—yes, we studied together—he was never serious. He and his friends, they were all the time laughing in the back row.”

“And who were his friends in the Academy?”

Ivone shrugged. “I do not remember. Pranksters, guttersnipes, not true artists. He was the only one of that sort who graduated.”

I let out a breath. So if Charlie had known the other two men at school, they hadn’t been close chums.

Ivone was still in full, indignant flow. “He did not show the respect for our great tradition, not then, not later. Always he was making jokes, even when he was on the stage, silly riddles and stories, little puzzles as though he were performing to entertain children.” He placed his toupee in its box as carefully as if it were the relic of some dead saint, and solemnly shut the lid. “I have appeared before the crowned heads of Europe and Asia in my day, and never once on the stage have I made a joke.”

I didn’t doubt him for a moment.

“I wish you’d kept your mouth shut,” I said. It didn’t come across as forceful as it sounds, since Emily had already pulled away from the curb and I was frantically groping on the floor for the other half of my seatbelt.

“Don’t be rude—you’re an employee, remember. Besides, I didn’t like him. He was a very small-souled man.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not the point. After you’d just gone and blurted that out about the book he wasn’t going to give anything away. I couldn’t very well ask him where he’d been when your dad died, for instance.”

Emily made a face. “But I know that already. He was onstage at the Rabbit Club—he’s been performing there for weeks. I checked.”

“What?”

“I checked. I called the Performing Artist’s Guild after you told me his name. He was working the night my father was killed.”

I stared. The trained fingers I had once insured (okay, only for five thousand bucks on a twenty-six-dollar monthly premium—it was a publicity stunt) itched to throttle her, or at least to pull those stupid glasses off and see if she drove any better without them.

“He was working? Fabrizio Ivone, this supposed murderer, was on the other side of town pulling coins out of people’s noses when your father died?”

“Yes, I just told you that I called the Guild. Don’t get so defensive—I didn’t expect you to do all the work, just the stuff that needed expert knowledge.”

I threw myself back against my seat, but our sudden stop in the middle of an intersection catapulted me forward again microseconds later. “I can’t believe I’m wasting my time on this nonsense,” I growled. The light had turned green again, but Charlie’s daughter seemed to be waiting for a shade she liked better. “The point I’m making, Emily, is that Fabrizio Ivone has an alibi. As in, ‘Release this honest citizen, Sergeant, he’s got an alibi.’”

She shook her head pityingly, as though I had just urged her to buy heavily into Flat Earth futures. “Haven’t you ever heard of hired killers?” We lurched into motion just as the light turned red once more.

You just can’t trust clients. It happens every time. They come through your door, wave money under your nose and make lots of promises—then boom! Next thing you know, that little party you were hired for turns out to be a smoker, and you’re doing card tricks for a bunch of surly drunks because the stripper hasn’t showed up.

Yeah, I’m a little bitter. When you’ve been around this business as long as I have you get that way. You splurge on a Tibetan Mystery Box some guy swears is just like new and when you get it home it’s riddled with woodworm. You order a shipment of doves from the mail order house and they forget to punch air-holes in the box. And women! Don’t even talk to me about women. I can’t count the number of times I’ve been standing around backstage somewhere, ten minutes before curtain for the Sunday matinee, arguing on the phone with my latest assistant, who isn’t there because she’s got water-bloat, or her boyfriend’s in jail, or because I introduced her as “the lovely Zelda” the night before and her name’s really “Zora.”

“Pull over,” I snapped. “And try using the brakes instead of just glancing off streetlights until the car stops.”

She followed my advice. (In fact, she used the brakes so enthusiastically that I wore a very accurate impression of the dashboard grain on my forehead for hours afterward.)

“Get the hell out, then,” she said. “I knew you were a loser from the moment I first saw you crawling around on the floor.”

“Well, I may be a loser...but you hired me.” The effect of my clever comeback and sweeping exit was diminished slightly by the fact that I hadn’t unbuckled the safety belt. The ensuing struggle also allowed me time to cool down a little. After I finally worked free and fell onto the sidewalk, I turned to look back, expecting to see the tears of a helpless woman, or perhaps a momentary glimpse of Charlie’s features in hers, which would remind me of the old friend whose desperate daughter this was. Emily wasn’t such a bad kid, really. I was half-ready to have my gruff masculine heart melted.

“Shut the damn door,” she snarled. If there were any tears, I definitely missed them.

She did manage to run over my foot as she drove away.

I suppose I shouldn’t have been too surprised, I reflected as I limped home. I had fallen out with Emily’s father much the same way. Nobody in the whole damn family could admit they were wrong.

Charlie Helton had been a wonderful guy, my mentor in the business. He’d helped me find my first agent and had shared many of his hard-won secrets with me, giving me a boost that few young performers got. He’d been everywhere almost, had done things few other people had even read about, and could tell you stories that would make your eyes pop out. But he could be difficult and stubborn at times, and as Ivone had so vividly remembered, he had a rather strange idea of fun. After he and Emily’s mother had broken up he had lived a solitary life—I hadn’t even known he’d been married until several years into our friendship—and like a lot of bachelor-types, his life revolved around what other people might consider pretty useless hobbies. In Charlie’s case there were two: puzzles and practical jokes.

Unfortunately, not all of his jokes were funny, at least to the victims. One such, a particularly complicated operation, had involved my booking for a show at a naturist colony in the Catskills. I was very uncertain, since it required me to perform naked except for cape and top hat, but Charlie convinced me that a lot of big entertainment people were weekend nudists, and that I would be bound to make some great contacts.

When I arrived at the resort the night of the show I was met backstage by the club manager, who was definitely naked. He was a big fat guy of about fifty, and knowing that people like him could do it helped me wrestle down my inhibitions. See, when you perform, if the stage lights are bright enough, you hardly see the audience anyway; the manager assured me that it would be just like doing a show in my own bedroom. So, I stripped, squared my shoulders, calmed my quivering stomach, and marched out onto the stage.

And no, it wasn’t a nudist colony, of course. It was a regular Catskills resort, median audience age: almost dead and holding. The “club manager” was a confederate of Charlie’s who’d taken off as soon as he’d finished his part of the scam.

The audience was not amused. Neither was I.

The sad thing was, Charlie and I fell out not because of the prank itself, nasty as it had been, but because I refused to admit there was anything humorous about it. I guess his pride was wounded—he thought he was the funniest guy in the world.

Things started to go downhill for me after that, but not because of my premature venture into performance art. I just caught some bad breaks. Well, a lot of bad breaks.

Maybe Charlie had been feeling guilty about our parting all these years, and about not being around to help me get back on my feet. Maybe that was why he’d told his daughter that if she ever needed someone to trust, to seek me out.

There was something else to consider, I suddenly realized. On the infinitesimal chance that Emily Heltenbocker was right and everyone else was wrong, maybe Charlie had been snuffed because one of his jokes had offended someone. Maybe he’d made a bad enemy, and it didn’t have anything to do with his manuscript at all.

I was pleased with this genuine detective-style thinking. Despite the misery of my long trudge home, I began to consider whether I should allow Emily—if she was suitably contrite—to rehire me. Charlie and I had been through a lot of good times before the bottom fell out. Maybe his daughter deserved a little patience.

Not to mention that she owed me for at least one night’s work.

“Your girlfriend’s on the phone,” shouted Tilly.

I put down my self-help bankruptcy book and unhurriedly picked up the receiver. I had known Emily would come crawling back, but I wasn’t going to let her off too easily.

“You still have my father’s graduation photograph,” she said in a tone like a whip-crack. “Send it back immediately or I’ll come over there and break your arm.”

She was playing it a little more cagily than I’d expected. “Don’t hurt me,” I said. “My health insurance lists attack-by-schoolteacher as an Act of God, and it’ll be hell getting them to pay.”

“Just send me the picture. Right now.”

I was sure I detected an undercurrent of playfulness in her voice, albeit well-camouflaged. “How about if I drop it by in person? Then we can discuss last night’s little difference of opinion.”

“If you come within a mile of me, you’re going to have to learn how to make balloon animals with your teeth.”

She hung up loudly enough to loosen a few of my fillings, but I knew I basically had her.

Thus it was that after only a few dozen more phone calls (and a slight strategic modification on my part which might have been mistaken by some unschooled observers for a cringing apology) Emily Heltenbocker and I resumed our partnership.

“Tell me their names again.” She revved the engine, although the light was still resolutely red.

I’d finally pinned down the other two mystery men, through laborious research in various trade booking guides. “Sandor Horja Nagy, the Hungarian Houdini—he’s the one we’re going to see right now. The other’s Gerard O’Neill. And, just for your information, they were both doing shows on the night in question, just like Ivone. Two more airtight alibis.”

“For goodness sake, Pinnard, you’re so unimaginative. We’re talking about magicians—people who disappear and reappear elsewhere for a living. Honestly, if this were a murder mystery in a book, you’d be the idiot cop they always have stumbling around to make the detective look good.”

“Thank you for your many kindnesses.” I reached into my pocket for my cigarettes. Emily had finally tendered my retainer and I had splurged on a whole carton. “Whatever you may think, a stage magician nearing retirement age cannot disappear in the middle of a downtown performance, catch a cab to the suburbs, murder an old classmate, and be back before the audience notices. And he can’t spin straw into gold or turn a pumpkin into a horse-drawn carriage either, just in case you still harbor some misconceptions about what real magicians do.” I leaned back and withdrew my new, top-of-the-line disposable lighter.

“Don’t you dare light that in my car. I don’t want my upholstery smelling of smoke.”

Obviously she had no similar problem with the scent of self-deceit and denial. I didn’t say that, of course. Long years of working with the public have taught me that, although the customer may not always be right, only a fool behaves otherwise before he’s been paid in full. “Look,” I said, “I’m just being sensible. You’re a nice lady, Emily, but I think you’re barking up the wrong tree. The police say it was an accident. The coroner said it was an accident. And all your suspects have alibis. When are you going to face up to what that really means?”

She started an angry reply, but bit it off. She stayed silent for a long while, and even when the light finally turned green, she accelerated with none of her usual gusto. I was pleased that I had finally made her see sense, but not exactly happy about it, if you know what I mean. Sometimes when something goes very wrong, we humans desperately want there to be a reason. It’s not fun being the person who takes that possibility away.

“It’s just not like my father,” she said at last. “Suicide, never. Not in a million years. So that leaves accident. But you knew him too, Pinnard. You know how carefully he planned everything.”

I had to admit that was true. Watching Charlie work up an illusion was like watching Admiral Nimitz setting out his bath toys—no detail too small for obsessive consideration. “But sometimes even careful people get careless,” I pointed out. “Or sometimes they just don’t give a damn any more. You told me he was having real bad financial problems.”

“You are too, but I don’t see you getting your throat slit.”

“Not when I’ve got a whole carton of cigarettes,” I said cheerfully. “I prefer my suicide slow.”

“That’s not very funny.”

I immediately felt bad. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry. Look, let’s go see this Nagy guy. Even if it turns out you’re wrong about the murder angle, you’ll feel better if you know for certain.”

She nodded, but didn’t seem very convinced. Or very cheerful. She was even still driving in an uncharacteristically moderate way. So, basically nice guy that I am, I sang a medley of Burt Bacharach songs for her as we made our way across town. I’ve always thought that if magic hadn’t worked out, I could have made a tidy bundle warbling “Walk on By” in your better grade of dinner-houses.

It didn’t jolly her up much. “I’ll pay you the rest of tonight’s fee right now if you shut up,” was how she put it.

Sandor Nagy (I think you’re supposed to say it “Nagy Sandor,” but what I know for sure about Hungarian customs you could write on the back of a postage stamp and still have room for your favorite goulash recipe) had seen better days. As a performer, our pal Ivone was, by comparison, Elvis.

We warmed the plastic chairs in the hallway of the Rotary Club while we waited for Nagy to finish changing his clothes in the men’s room. The show had been interesting—if watching a drunk perform for a bunch of guys offended because the entertainment was more blasted than they were is the kind of thing that interests you. Partly out of pity, we took Nagy to the 24-hour coffee shop across the street and bought him a Grand Slam Breakfast. (There is no time in places like that, so you might as well eat breakfast. Actually, there is time, but only the waitresses experience it, which is why they’re all about a hundred and four years old. I’ve always thought someone should write a science fiction book about this paradox.)

“I’m not quite sure what went wrong with that trunk escape,” Nagy said. Or slurred, to be more precise. “Usually it works like a charm.”

After the gruelling experience of his show, I had been planning to down a quick couple of beers—I wasn’t going to drink club soda forever just because I was hanging around with Ms. Ruler-across-the-knuckles—but the old guy’s breath and the bold yet intricate vein patterns on his nose persuaded me to order myself a Coke. Thus, I had my mouth wrapped around a straw and didn’t have to comment.

“I’m sure you would have got out eventually,” said Emily. “I didn’t think they really needed to call the fire department.”

Nagy eyed his soft-boiled eggs with great sadness. I think he would much rather have had a couple of belts himself, but we had declined to buy him anything with a proof content. He wasn’t real coherent as it was, even after all the oxygen the fire crew had forced into him. “I’ll let you in on a secret,” he said. “I’m not as sharp as I used to be. A step slower these days, if you know what I mean.”

“Well, you and my father were at the Academy at the same time, weren’t you? That was quite a way back.”

I smiled. Emily was showing definite improvement. All the same, interrogating this guy made about as much sense as bringing down a pigeon with a surface-to-air missile. If he was a murderer, I was Merlin.

“Oh, that’s right, you said you were Charlie Helton’s kid. Shame about him. I heard he was writing a book. Wouldn’t want to take time from my escape work, myself. There’s a lot of practice involved.” He pushed one of his eggs with the fork, as though unsure whether to commit to something so strenuous as eating. “He was a strange one, your dad. Drove a lot of people crazy.”

“Did he? He made enemies?” Emily was leaning forward, giving the old guy that penetrating would-you-like-to-share-that-with-the-class gaze that made me cringe even when it wasn’t aimed at me. I refrained from pointing out that her elbow was in a puddle of catsup. Purely because I didn’t want to distract her, of course.

“Not enemies, no. Not really.” Sandor Nagy stopped to think, a process that clearly needed some ramping-up time. It was a good half-minute before he came up with: “He was just...he bragged a lot. Told a lot of stories. Played tricks on people.”

Now it was my turn to lean forward. My backfired-prank theory was sounding better. “Anyone in particular that he upset?”

Nagy shook his head. “Not that I could tell you—it’s been a long time. He just pissed a lot of people off. Pardon my French, Miss.”

I chewed on my straw, disgusted with myself for taking the idea of murder seriously for even a second. “Let me ask you another question,” I said. “Are you really Hungarian? Because you don’t have an accent.”

Nagy frowned at me and squinted his bloodshot eyes. Starve Popeye the Sailor Man for a few weeks, then strap him into an extremely musty tux, and you basically had Nagy. “I sure as hell am! Both my parents were from the old country, even if I ain’t been there. At least I got a family connection. One of those punks at the Academy called himself ‘Il Mysterioso Giorgio,’ and he wasn’t even Italian! Some chump kid from Weehawken!”

We left the Hungarian Houdini muttering angrily at his hash browns.

I had mixed feelings when I got downstairs to the office the next day. I was more convinced than ever that we were wasting our time, and that Emily—who was actually a pretty okay person—was going to get her feelings hurt. On the other hand, she’d paid me a nice little fee, and the story was playing big and bold in the tabloids.

It wasn’t front page in The Scrutinizer, but it was near the front, and a full-page spread to boot. There was an artist’s rendition of “The Death Basket” (which included far more swords than were actually involved in Charlie’s demise), a photo of Charlie in his stage outfit, and one of the coroner and the police chief at a news conference, looking very serious. (In fact, the photo had been taken during some other and far more important case, but I must admit it gave the thing an air of drama.) The only item conspicuously missing was one of the publicity photos of Yours Truly I’d sent to them (there’s no such thing as bad PR, especially when you’ve been stuck on the birthday party circuit for a few years), but I was mentioned prominently in all the articles, even if The Metropolitan managed to spell my name “Pinrod.” So, all in all, it could have been worse.

Emily didn’t seem to think so, though. When I called her, she sounded tired and depressed. “I’m beginning to think you’re right,” she said. “Whatever was in the manuscript, it’s gone. The tabloid reporters won’t leave me alone. After I finish paying you, I’ll be broke—my savings have gone on Dad’s funeral. I think it’s time to go fishing.”

“Huh?” I had a sudden and disconcerting vision of Emily in hip-waders.

“It’s just a family expression. When times are bad, when the bill collectors are after you, you say ‘I think I’ll go fishing.’ And that’s how I feel right now.”

I was still thinking about the hip-waders. In a certain kind of way they can be a pretty sexy garment. I suppose it has something to do with my reading Field & Stream too much during my adolescence. In any case, distracted as I was, I did a wildly foolish and uncharacteristic thing.

“Listen, Emily,” I said. “I don’t want your money.”

“What does that mean?” She sounded angry.

“I mean, I don’t want any more of your money, and you can have back what I haven’t spent yet. But we’ll still go see O’Neill this afternoon. On the house, okay?”

She didn’t say anything right away. I assumed she had been struck dumb by gratitude, but I wasn’t sure. Charlie’s daughter had proven herself a mite unpredictable. While I waited for the verdict, I re-scrutinized The Scrutinizer. It was too bad they hadn’t run a picture of Emily, I thought—she was a very good-looking woman.

I frowned. Something in the paper’s coverage had been nagging at me since I’d read it, some little connection I couldn’t make that was now bidding heavily for my attention, but between certain thoughts of an imaginary Emily in a fishing-gear pictorial and then the sudden reappearance of the actual Emily’s voice, it didn’t have much of a chance.

“That’s...that’s very kind of you, Dalton. You’re a really nice person.”

She’d never called me by my first name before. That nagging detail was abruptly heckled off the Amateur Night stage of my consciousness.

“And you’re a nice person too, Emily.” I hung up, feeling oddly as though I might be blushing.

Tilly was standing in my office doorway. She’d heard the whole conversation. Her expression of amused contempt was probably similar to what ancient Christians saw on the faces of Roman lions.

“Your gills are showing, Pinrod,” she said. “What an idiot—hook, line, and sinker.”

I summoned up great reserves of inner strength and ignored her.

I spent all of O’Neill’s performance trying to decide what Emily would do if I put my arm around her. I’d like to say we were paying close attention to the show, but we weren’t. (I’m reasonably certain that murder investigators don’t date each other, or that if they do, they keep the dates separate from the actual investigations. I hope so.)

Not that Gerry O’Neill’s routine was the kind of thing that invited close attention. It was a mixture of old gags and fairly lame sleight-of-hand. Only the fact that it was a charity performance in front of a ward full of sick children made it something more than tiresome. And, to be fair, the kids seemed to like it.

O’Neill, it turned out, was the only one of the three who’d been on good terms with Charlie: he’d kept in loose touch with him over the years. As we walked him out to his car, O’Neill wiped the perspiration from his round face and walrus mustache and told us with impressive sincerity how upset he’d been when he heard the news.

“He was a good guy, Charlie was. A little loco sometimes, but basically a heart of gold.” He stuffed several feet of colored kerchief back into his pocket and patted Emily’s arm. “You got my real best wishes, missy. I was broken up to hear about it.”

Emily’s questions were perfunctory. She seemed a lot more cheerful than she’d been on the phone, but she seemed to be losing interest in the investigation. I wasn’t really surprised—it was pretty difficult to feature any of our three suspects as the Fu Manchu criminal mastermind-type.

“When you say Charlie was a little loco sometimes,” I asked, “what do you mean? His practical jokes?”

O’Neill grinned. “I heard about some of those. What a card. But I mostly meant his stories. He was full of stories, and some of ’em were pretty crazy.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know, places he said he’d been, things he’d seen. He told me once he’d been in China and some old guy there taught him how to talk to birds. Man, if you listened to him, he’d done everything! Snuck into a sultan’s harem somewhere, hung out with voodoo priests in Haiti, tamed elephants in Thailand, you name it. Crazy stories.”

Emily rose to her father’s defense. “He did travel quite a bit, Mister O’Neill. He toured in a lot of places, took his show all over the world—Asia, South America, the Caribbean—especially when he was younger. He was a pretty big star.”

O’Neill was a gallant man. “Then maybe all them stories were true, missy. In any case, I’m sorry he’s gone. He was a helluva guy.”

We watched O’Neill drive off. As we strolled back across the parking lot, Emily took my hand.

“Maybe it was an accident,” she said, and turned to look at me. The sunset brought out the deep gold colors in her hair. “Maybe that stuff he wrote on the photo was just another of his stories or silly tricks. But at least I did my best to find out.” She sighed. “Talking to these people reminded me of all the parts of his life I missed out on. I didn’t see a lot of him while I was growing up.”

I didn’t say anything. I was concentrating on the feeling of her warm skin beneath my fingers, and thinking about what I was about to do. I stopped, pulled her toward me, and carefully removed her glasses.

“Why, Miss Heltenbocker,” I said, as if in surprise, “you’re beautiful. Do you mind if I kiss you?”

She snatched them back and jammed them into place, brow furrowed in annoyance. “I hate it when everything’s blurry. Kiss me with my goddamn glasses on.”

What was it like? Do I have to tell you?

Magic.

I woke up in the middle of the night. The thing that had been bothering me had come back. Boy, had it ever come back.

I ran downstairs to my office, not bothering with a bathrobe. This should show you how excited I was—even though Tilly lived on the other side of town, wouldn’t be in for hours, and the office was effectively part of my home, going there naked even at 4 am made me feel queasily disrespectful. But the yammering in my brain wouldn’t wait for anything.

A few minutes later I ran back upstairs and woke Emily.

(Look, just because she was a schoolteacher doesn’t mean you should make old-fashioned assumptions.)

“Get up, get up!” I was literally jumping up and down.

“What the hell is going on, Pinnard?” She sat up, rubbing her eyes and looking utterly gorgeous. After the night we’d just spent, I wasn’t at all worried about her use of my last name.

“I’ve solved it! And you’re never going to believe it!” I grabbed her arm, almost dragging her toward the stairs. She very firmly pulled free, then went to get her glasses from the bedside table. Next—and clearly second in order of importance—she found my bathrobe and put it on. In a gesture of solidarity, I pulled my underwear off the ceiling light (don’t ask), donned it, and led her to my office.

“Brace yourself,” I said. “This is very weird.” I took a breath, trying to think of the best way to explain. “First of all, you were right—it wasn’t an accident.”

Emily sat up straight. “Somebody did murder him?” A strange look came over her face. “Or are you going to tell me it was suicide?”

I was suddenly reluctant. Waking someone up in the middle of the night to give them the kind of news I was about to give Emily could have a number of shocking effects, and I felt very protective of her—and of what we suddenly seemed to have together. “Well, see for yourself ” I spread the copy of The Scrutinizeron the desktop, then laid the graduation picture on top of it. “Something was bothering me about this article, but with everything else that happened today, well, I sort of forgot about it. Then, about fifteen minutes ago, I woke up and I knew.” I pointed at the picture, at one of the faces that Charlie hadn’t circled. “See this kid? You know who that is?”

Emily stared, then shook her head.

“That’s ‘Il Mysterioso Giorgio’—the one Nagy mentioned. You know, the fake Italian from Weehawken.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“You will. Remember Fabrizio Ivone talking about those delinquent friends of your dad’s who didn’t graduate the Academy? Well, he was wrong—one of them did. It was young ‘Giorgio’ here. Although he never made it as a working magician.”

“How do you know that?”

I lifted the graduation picture and pointed to The Scrutinizer. “Because he would have had trouble being a stage magician and holding down the job of Chief Coroner.” I put the graduation picture beside the news photo for comparison. “Meet ‘Il Mysterioso Giorgio’ today—George Bridgewater.”

She stared at the two photos, then looked up at me. “My God, I think you’re right. But I still don’t understand. What does it mean? Did he cover up something about my dad’s death?”

This was the hard part. Suddenly, under the bright fluorescent lights, my certainty had dwindled. It would be unutterably cruel if I turned out to be wrong. I took her hand.

“Emily,” I said. “I think your dad’s alive.”

She pulled away from me, stepping back as though I’d slapped her. The tears that suddenly formed in her eyes made me want to slap myself. “What are you saying? That’s crazy!”

“Look, you said it yourself—Charlie’d never be a suicide. And he wasn’t the type to have an accident. But you said he’d traveled in the Caribbean, and he told O’Neill he’d studied with voodoo priests! They have chemicals they use in voodoo that make people look like they’re dead. That’s where the zombie legends come from. It’s true—I read about it!”

She laughed, angry, frightened. “Where? In Astrology and Detective Gazette?”

“In a science magazine. Emily, they’ve done studies. Voodoo priests can use this stuff to put people in a kind of temporary coma. All the vital signs disappear. No paramedic struggling to keep your dad alive would know the difference, not if he’d made a real but shallow cut and spread a lot of blood around. It wouldn’t even have to be human blood, since nobody would think of testing it when he was locked in a room by himself with the key in his pocket. But you’d have to have a confederate in place for later, ’cause nobody could live through a real autopsy. Chief Coroners hardly ever do actual examinations, so it’s a little bit of a coincidence he was writing the report at all. Even weirder that he wouldn’t step aside when he found out it was an old school chum.”

“So this guy Bridgewater helped my dad fake his own death? Why?”

“Who knows? A last prank for old time’s sake, maybe? You said your dad was depressed and broke. Maybe it was a way for Giorgio the Mysterious to help a pal get out of a bad situation.” I didn’t want to mention it, but it was also possible that the deal had been a little less friendly—old Charlie, collector of gossip and odd stories, might have had a wee bit of blackmail material on Bridgewater.

Emily stared at the pictures. When she turned back to me, she was calmer, but very grim. “I don’t think you did this to be cruel,” she said, “but this is so much more farfetched than anything I suggested. It’s just crazy.”

I had a sick feeling in my stomach, kind of like something very cold was hibernating there. I knew I’d blown it. “But...”

She cut me off, her voice rising in anger. “I can almost believe my father would do something this wild, this outrageous—heaven knows, he loved a good trick, and he was having a lot of problems. But I can’t for a moment believe that he would make me think he was dead—with not even a hint that he’d survived—and then on top of it send me off to hook up with a bum like you and go on some insane hunt for a nonexistent murderer!” She waved the picture in front of my face. “Look at this! This is his handwriting! If he wanted to tip me off, why didn’t he circle Bridgewater the coroner? Instead, he picks these three totally harmless...”

I was so far into my flinch that at first I didn’t open my eyes. When she had remained silent for a good ten seconds, I peeked. Emily was still frowning, but it was a different kind of frown. “Oh, God,” she said at last.

She flopped the photo down so the back was showing. I had written down the men’s names as I identified them.

“Gerard O’Neill.” Emily’s voice was strained. “Fabrizio Ivone. Sandor Horja Nagy. Oh my God.”

“What?”

“Look at the initials. G-O-N—F-I—S-H-N” The tears came for real now. “‘GONE FISHING.’”

There was a good deal more to the story, of course, but we didn’t find out immediately. When we went to see Bridgewater, the coroner blustered at us about foolish accusations and the penalties for slander, but he didn’t seem very fierce about it. (We later discovered that one of Charlie’s Academy-era jokes had yielded photographs of a naked “Giorgio” in bed with a sheep dressed in a garter belt. It had all been perfectly innocent, of course, but still not the kind of thing a local politician wants to see on the wire services.) Still, it was a few more months before we knew for sure.

Apparently Charlie Helton did have an agent Emily hadn’t known about—a theatrical agent, but someone who had contacts in publishing. When, at the height of the tabloid fury about the Murdered Magician Mystery, the agent announced that he actually had the dead man’s manuscript, it set off a bidding war, and the book sold for a very healthy advance. As Charlie’s only heir, Emily received all but a small part of what was left after the agent took his cut. When the book quickly earned back its advance, she began to receive all but that same small percentage of the royalties that began flowing in. Even after the story lost its tabloid notoriety, A Magical Life continued to sell nicely. As it turned out, Charlie had written quite a good book, full of vivid stories about his life and travels, and lots of enjoyable but not-too-scurrilous backstage gossip about the world of stage magicians.

Even Fabrizio Ivone didn’t come out too bad in Charlie’s memoirs, although his inability to take a joke was mentioned several times.

That small portion of the income Emily didn’t get? Well, every month, the agent dispatches a check to a post office box in Florida—no, I won’t tell you where exactly, just in Florida somewhere. Suffice it to say it’s a small town with good fishing. The checks are made out to someone named Booker H. Charlton. Emily decided not to contest this diversion of royalties, and in fact we plan to go visit old Booker as soon as we can get out of town.

Why delay our visit to the mystery fisherman? Well, we’ve been real busy just lately setting up the Charlie Helton Museum of the Magical Arts. It’s turned out to be a full-time job for all of us: Emily took early retirement from the school system to manage the operation, and Tilly answers the phone and handles the finances—which I’m happy to say, are in the black. Tilly’s mom works the ticket booth, flashing her expensive smile at the customers all day long. Me? Well, I’ve got the balloon animal concession pretty much wrapped up, and I’m working on a book of my own.

Oh, and in case anybody’s disappointed that this has been a story about magicians without any real magic in it, I should mention one last thing. You remember how Charlie had scrawled on the back of his photo: “Trust Pinardo”? We found out a few months afterward that if Charlie’s handwriting had been a little darker, we would have noticed a hyphen between the two words. See, we were going through some of his papers and found out that he’d stashed away a couple of hundred dollars so Emily wouldn’t get stuck paying for his fake funeral. The deposit was in a trust fund at a small savings institution—“Pinardo Thrift and Loan,” no relation to yours truly.

In other words, the very beautiful woman who I am delighted to say now calls herself Ms. Emily Heltenbocker-Pinnard, the light of my life and (I hope) the warmth of my declining years, walked into my office that day on a completely mistaken assumption. We are an accident—a fluke of fate.

So there you go. Love (as Bogart once said about a black bird, and Shakespeare said about something I don’t quite remember) is definitely the stuff that dreams are made of. It remains the greatest mystery and the only truly reliable magic. Satisfied?