

ALASTAIR BAFFLE'S EMPORIUM OF WONDERS

by Mike Resnick

According to Locus, Mike Resnick is the all-time leading award winner for short fiction, and most of those stories have appeared in *Asimov's*. His latest novel, *Starship: Mercenary*, appeared from Pyr in December, and Sub-terranean Press will be publishing *The Other Teddy Roosevelts* in February. In his latest tale, he takes a look at the precious gifts that can be found, and lost, at...

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Gold and Silver—that's us. We've been a team since major league baseball ended at the Mississippi River and the flag only had forty-eight stars. (Looked a lot nicer back then. More regular, sort of, with six rows of eight—or maybe it was eight rows of six. I suppose it depends on whether you were standing or lying down.) Between us we've outlived three wives (one of them his, two of them mine) and two kids (both his), we've stayed friends for more than three-quarters of a century (seventy-eight years to be exact), and we've been living together at the Hector McPherson Retirement Home since ... well, since we couldn't live on our own anymore.

He's Gold—Maury Gold. Me, I'm Nate Silver. I think it was Silverstein until my grandfather changed it back when Teddy Roosevelt was still president. Maury's dad changed his right after World War I, from Goldberg or Goldman or Gold-something-else. Makes no difference what they used to be. We're Gold and Silver now.

We met seventy-eight years ago, like I said. We've always lived in Chicago. It was pretty safe when we were kids. The cops had cleaned up Al Capone and his friends, and the place wasn't crawling with junkies and panhandlers yet, so we were each allowed to take the subway down to the Loop by ourselves, me from Rogers Park on the North Side, Maury from South Shore a couple of miles beyond the University of Chicago, which was overflowing with geniuses and Communists—frequently the same people—back in those days.

One of the things I loved to do was go to the Palmer House, the ritziest hotel in town. The guest rooms started on the third or fourth floor, but the ground floor and the mezzanine were filled with shops that carried the most fascinating things: clocks that glowed in the dark, pianos that played by themselves, clothes and jewels imported from exotic-sounding places like Constantinople and Hong Kong and Bombay.

And the most fascinating thing of all was a tiny store up on the mezzanine. It was called Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders, and it was a magic shop. It carried every trick under the sun (or so it seemed to me). There were boxes where Alastair Baffle would put anything from a coin to an egg, and it would vanish right before your eyes. There were empty hats that suddenly weren't empty any more, but filled with rabbits or flowers or colored silks. There was a full-sized guillotine, and somehow, faster than the eye could follow, the blade would drop and magically miss Alastair Baffle's neck. There were card tricks and rope tricks and magic wands that could fly through the air. There was a clock with the face of a beautiful woman, and just when you lost interest in it she'd smile and speak to you.

And the most wonderful thing of all was the magic show. Oh, he wouldn't perform it for free—but if you promised to buy a trick, and showed him your money (usually fifty cents would do, but if you didn't have it, once in a while he'd agree to sell you a twenty-five-cent trick), he'd spend half an hour showing you all the new tricks that had arrived since your last visit.

I thought only magicians would frequent the store, but the clientele didn't look like the kind of magicians you saw on stage. (No, I'd never seen a magic show on stage when I was a kid, but I saw all the ads for them, and I knew that magicians were long lean guys who looked good in white tie and tails like Fred Astaire, and were always assisted by scantily clad women who made me eager to grow up.)

But the few people who I saw coming and going weren't like that at all. One of them looked just like Paul Muni in one of those movies where he's on the lam from the law. Another was all decked out in silks and satins, and wore a turban with a glittering jewel on the front of it. There were women, too; not the kind you expected to see on stage, but with elegant hats and veils, exotic make-up, and dark gloves. Those were the days when a lot of women wore wraps that were made from foxes that still had the heads attached. One day I saw Alastair Baffle wave good-bye to a woman who was leaving the store as I was entering. Then he said something, not in English, to one of the fox heads, and I could have sworn it looked up and winked at him.

My allowance back then was a quarter a week. I used to go there whenever I had fifty cents to buy a trick—but since the subway cost a quarter each way, that was about once a month. I kept wondering why no other kid had discovered the almost-free magic show—and then I met Maury.

He'd been going to the store for more than a year, same as me but on

different Saturdays, gazing at all the wonders and getting his magic show in exchange for buying a trick.

“Ah! Young Mister Silver!” said Alastair Baffle when I entered his Emporium that Saturday morning. “There is someone here I think you should meet.”

I was hoping it was a half-dressed magician’s assistant, but it was only another boy, dark-haired, kind of skinny, a couple of inches shorter than me.

“Mister Silver, say hello to Mister Gold.”

“Maury Gold,” he said, extending his hand. I took it, told him I was Nate Silver, and we promptly lost all interest in each other when Alastair Baffle began performing the Corinthian Rope Trick, followed by the Vanishing Mouse. But I had an extra dime and we stopped for a soda when we left, and we got to talking, and found that we had all kinds of things in common despite his being a White Sox fan and me rooting for the Cubs. We spent hours there, and finally decided we’d better go home before our parents called the cops, but we made arrangements to meet at the Emporium of Wonders four weeks later.

We met every month for two years. Then his dad got transferred to the north side, they moved, and he wound up in my school district. We became inseparable. We played on the same teams, read the same books, lusted after the same girls, and while we didn’t go to Alastair Baffle’s Emporium of Wonders once a month any more, we remembered to go once each year to celebrate our meeting.

World War II broke out just about the time we graduated from high school. We both enlisted the same day, but I wound up in Europe and Maury spent the next three and a half years in the Pacific. He was at Tarawa and Okinawa, I was in Italy and the Battle of the Bulge, neither of us ever caught a bullet or a social disease, and when we got out we decided to go into business together.

Truth is, we went into a lot of businesses together, one after the other. Never went broke, never got ahead. We’d try one for a couple of years, then decide it wasn’t going to make us rich, sell out or close up, start another, and so on. We owned a drugstore, a pizzeria, a delivery service, a hardware store, even a record shop. The record shop was the only one that ever made a decent profit, but by then rock and roll had replaced real music and we couldn’t stand the sound of it, so we sold out once again.

And then one day we turned around, and we were a pair of eighty-two-year-old widowers. I'd lost my first wife to cancer, my second to a stroke. Maury's wife was killed in a car accident, he lost a son in Vietnam and a daughter to drugs. We were living on our Social Security checks, which weren't much. Maury's arthritis was getting worse every month; there were days he couldn't drag himself out of bed, days he found it too painful to walk. With me it was a bunch of things—I'd lost a lung to cancer, I had prostate problems, an artificial hip, a few other ailments, none of them fatal, but they'd started to add up—and with no one around to care for either of us we decided it was time to move into an assisted-living facility. We chose the Hector McPherson Home, not because the service was any better, and certainly not for the food, but because they had a small apartment with two bedrooms, and we could keep each other company. Besides, no one else wanted to listen to us. Most people would talk about Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan and Julia Roberts and Tom Cruise. Us, we'd talk about Citation and the Bambino, Mae West and Bogart and Lefty Grove. They'd pin pictures of Pam Anderson and Paris Hilton on their walls; we'd remember pin-ups of Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth in our barracks.

We moved in a couple of years before the millennium, and we were reasonably content. I suppose some of the others thought we were gay, though straight or gay I don't know what they thought a couple of ninety-year-old geezers could do when the lights were out. We didn't figure to see much of the future, so we talked about the past. We'd talk about JFK and Nixon, and about Nashua and Swaps. We'd talk about Sugar Ray Robinson and Jersey Joe Walcott, about the ones who lived and the ones—there were so many of them, like Marilyn and James Dean and Brian Piccolo—who didn't.

And sooner or later the conversation would come around to Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders, where we'd met so many years ago.

"What a place it was!" said Maury. "You know, I really believed that he could perform magic."

"Ah, come on, Maury," I said. "He sold tricks. Every one of them had a gimmick. You always bought one, and he always showed you how it worked."

"I didn't say you or I could do magic," replied Maury. "I said I thought *he* could."

"You're turning into a senile old man," I told him.

“And you’re turning into a grouchy old one,” he shot back. “Hell, I was a kid. My whole life, the whole world was ahead of me, a billion possibilities. Why *shouldn’t* I believe in magic?”

“He never called himself a magician,” I said. “I think the term is illusionist.”

“He never called himself anything,” said Maury stubbornly. “But he could make a parrot vanish, or turn it back into an egg, and when I was eleven years old that was magic enough for me.”

“He *was* good, wasn’t he?” I said. “I wonder why we never saw him on TV or in the movies.”

“If your film lab can make Superman fly or send the *Millennium Falcon* out at light speeds, what do you need a real magician for?”

“He wasn’t a real magician,” I said.

“He was real enough for you and me,” said Maury. “We kept going back, didn’t we?”

“Until we outgrew him.”

“I never outgrew him,” insisted Maury. “Life just kept getting more and more complicated, and I had other things to do.”

“Hell,” I said, “maybe we should have hired him to entertain at the pizza joint. We might not have gone broke quite so fast.”

“He wouldn’t have done it.”

“How do you know?”

“He was a connoisseur, not a performer,” said Maury with conviction.

“Too bad,” I said. “Maybe he could have magicked the customers into spending more money.”

“He probably could have, if he’d wanted to,” said Maury. “I don’t think he gave much of a damn about money. Why would he take half an hour out of his Saturday and show us a couple of dozen tricks, just to get us to

spend a quarter or a half dollar?"

Maury was like that. He'd get going on a subject, something he remembered from thirty or fifty or seventy years ago, and he'd just go on and on and on.

"Give it a rest," I said irritably. "He's probably been dead for half a century."

"So what? He's the reason we met."

"Yeah, Wall Street would have tanked if it weren't for Gold and Silver."

"What's the matter with you?" he said. "You didn't used to be like this."

"I didn't used to need my own private oxygen supply," I said. "I didn't used to have to go the bathroom every hour. I didn't used to need a cane. I didn't used to do a lot of things I do now."

"Grump," he muttered. "You're an old grump."

"And are you a young one?" I said. "I seem to remember ninety candles on your birthday cake. Damned near set the place on fire."

"Come on, Nate," he said. "These are supposed to be our golden years. Try not to be so damned grouchy."

"My golden years were a quarter of a century ago—and everything hurt *then* too."

"You think you're the only one who ever got old?" he demanded. "I'm not even going to be able to walk from my wheelchair to my goddamned bed in another month—but I'm not sitting around just waiting to die!"

So I got his daily harangue about how we shouldn't be spectators at the pageant of life, that we should be participants, and like always I tried not to laugh at the thought of him and his wheelchair and me with my metal hip and my oxygen bottle participating in anything. I mean, hell, half the time his hands were too sore even to move a checker across the board, and there were days, more and more often, when I considered just throwing my oxygen out the window and ending it all.

He calmed down after awhile, like he always did, and we started

talking about who you'd rather have watching your back in Tombstone, John Wayne or Gary Cooper. Probably Clint Eastwood could have handled them both, but he was one of the new kids, so we never even considered him.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper before," said Maury. He was always saying that, and he always meant it. It wasn't his fault he was so riddled with arthritis that he had to blow up every now and then.

"No problem," I said.

"Thanks."

"Of course," I continued, "if I'd have known what a pain in the ass you'd be to live with, I'd have had Alastair Baffle turn you into a horned toad all those years ago."

"At least I could have gone on the road with him. Sylvia's notion of a vacation was a shopping trip to Evanston."

"He didn't go on the road," I said. "He was always there."

"I wonder if he still is."

"Come on, Maury, he wasn't a young man back when we were going there. He'd be, I don't know, maybe 125 or 130 now."

"I know, I know," he said. "Still, I wonder if the shop is still there."

"After seventy-five years?" I said.

"We stopped by to tell him we were going into the service, don't you remember?" said Maury.

"Okay, so it was open seventy-two years ago. Big difference."

"Nate, I'm going to spend the rest of my life in this fucking building. I'd like to go out one last time."

"So go."

"And the one thing I'd most like to see is Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders."

"I'd like to see Babe Ruth call his shot against the Cubs," I said.

“We’re both of us doomed to be disappointed.”

“Babe Ruth’s dead and buried. Maybe the shop is still open. Maybe his kid or his grandkid is running it. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“I’m a ninety-two-year-old man with one lung and one hip,” I replied. “Just getting up in the morning is adventure enough.”

“Well, I’m going to go,” he said. “If I wait another week I won’t be able to move out of this fucking chair, so I’m going tomorrow morning.”

“To find a shop that probably hasn’t been in business for sixty years or more,” I said. “You’re losing it, Maury.”

“If I am, maybe Alastair Baffle’s is where I’ll find it.”

The nurses came by to check on us then, and after they left we watched a wrestling match on TV. Wrestling has changed a lot since the days of Verne Gagne and Strangler Lewis. Nobody used wrestling holds anymore. They fought with chairs and tables, and a third party was always racing into the ring to coldcock whoever he was up against on next week’s card. After awhile I got sick of it, as I always do, and went to bed.

When I got up I figured Maury had forgotten all about his idiot plan to go downtown and hunt for the magic shop, but he’d already shaved and gotten dressed. When he saw I was awake, he wheeled his chair over to my bed.

“Jake, do you mind if I take along a couple of your Percosets, just in case?”

“No, of course you can take them,” I said, swinging my feet tenderly to the floor. “Hell, we might as well take the whole bottle.”

“We?” he repeated.

“You don’t think I’d let you go alone, do you?”

“I was afraid you might,” he admitted.

“What kind of friend would I be if I did that?”

“The grouchy kind.”

"I'm just grouchy because I don't know what's out there anymore," I said. "Maybe it's time for each of us to take a last look."

"Thanks, Nate."

"By the way, are we *allowed* to leave the place?"

"I never thought of that," he admitted.

"Maybe we should sneak out now, while they're all busy preparing morning meds and breakfast."

He nodded, popped a Percoset and a couple of his own pain pills, and got up out of his wheelchair.

"Here," I said, handing him my cane and going to my closet for my spare. "Let's go down the back stairs and out into the alley. They'll all be working at the front of the place."

And that's what we did.

"Where the hell's the subway from here?" asked Maury when we'd made it to a corner.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I think we're far enough out that we'll want the El."

"I don't see any elevated stations or tracks," he said, looking around.

"I don't see anything that looks like a subway station either," I said.

"So what'll we do?" asked Maury. "I'm not going back, not after I've only traveled half a block."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my battered old leather wallet. "How many more trips out are we going to take?" I said. "What the hell am I saving it for?"

He grinned and flagged down a passing cab. It took us a couple of minutes to get into it—we're neither of us as spry as we used to be—but we finally got seated and told the cabbie, who looked like he'd been born anywhere but here, to take us to the Palmer House.

"You're sure you don't want to stop for some breakfast first?" I asked

Maury as we drove through the Near North Side.

“The Palmer House is still in business,” said Maury, “or the cabbie would have asked us where it was, or what we were talking about. And if Chicago’s most elegant hotel is still in business, it’s got to have a restaurant or two on the premises.”

“Yeah, it makes sense,” I agreed.

“And that way the trip won’t be a total waste if the shop is gone.”

“Ah, come on, Maury. I’m happy to see the city one last time, but you don’t *really* think the shop is still there, do you?”

“Even if it’s not, this is where Gold and Silver met and became a lifelong team,” he said. “What’s wrong with seeing the beginning one more time before we reach the end?”

“Hell, if you’d put it that way last night we’d never have had an argument.”

“Come on, Nate,” he said. “We always argue.” Suddenly he smiled. “That’s probably what’s kept us together so long. Neither of us will ever admit the other got the best of him.”

I didn’t answer, but I had a feeling he was right.

Traffic started getting really heavy, downtown heavy, Loop heavy, and we crawled along, getting maybe a block a minute if the lights were with us, less if they weren’t. But finally we pulled up to the door of the Palmer House. My eyes aren’t sharp enough to read a meter any longer, so I just kept shoving bills at the cabbie, and when he smiled too much I took the last one back and we hobbled into the hotel.

“Hasn’t changed much,” I noted.

“Look at all the gilt,” said Maury. “It shines just the way it did seventy-five years ago.”

“You know,” I said, “I swear I remember that big leather chair.”

“Me too,” he said. “I’m starting to get excited. Maybe it *is* still here.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” I said, indicating the escalator.

We waited until no one else wanted to use it—we're not too quick or steady on our feet even on good days—and then rode up to the mezzanine level.

"Off to the right," said Maury.

"I know."

We walked past a row of stores, mostly selling jewelry and women's clothing, and then we came to the shop—but it wasn't Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders anymore. There were twenty pairs of women's shoes displayed in the window, and hundreds more inside.

"May I help you?" said a well-dressed young saleswoman as we stood in the doorway, seeing not what was there now but what used to be there.

"No, thank you," I said.

"If you're looking for the formal wear shop, it's down in the gallery."

"Formal wear?" said Maury.

"They used to be here until about six years ago."

"You'd be surprised at what used to be here," he replied sadly. Then he turned to me. "Let's go."

"How are you holding up?" I asked as we approached the escalator.

"I'm okay," he said. Then: "So I'm a foolish old man. At least I know for sure now that it's gone."

"Too bad," I said. "I could have used a little half-hour magic show."

We rode down to the main floor, and then the pain got too much for Maury and he had to sit down. Naturally he chose the big leather chair, which meant I was probably going to need help pulling him up out of it.

He popped a couple of pain pills, then grimaced, and asked for a hand up. I was already wheezing and sucking oxygen, so I asked an old white-haired guard to help.

“Thanks,” said Maury when we’d pulled him to his feet.

“Happy to be of service,” said the guard. “Can I direct you anywhere?”

“I sure as hell doubt it,” I said. “We came down here looking for a shop that probably hasn’t been in business for the last fifty or sixty years.”

“It was a silly notion,” said Maury. “It was my fault.”

“What were you looking for?”

“Makes no difference,” said Maury. “It’s not here.”

“Stores move. Maybe I can help you.”

“This one was before even your time,” I said.

“It must have been some shop to bring you two back after all these years,” said the guard.

“It was,” said Maury. “It was a little magic store where we met for the first time.”

“Owned by a fellow with a really odd name?” asked the guard.

“Alastair Baffle,” said Maury.

“That’s the one.”

“You’ve heard of it?” said Maury eagerly. “Is there a photo of it around here somewhere?”

“Why settle for a photo when you can visit the real thing?” asked the guard.

“It’s still in business?” I said disbelievingly.

“Yeah. It’s moved around a lot. Last I heard it was just south of the Loop on State Street, right near where I used to go to watch the burlesque shows when I was a callow young man.” He smiled and winked at us. “Now I’m a dirty old one.”

“And you’re sure it’s Alastair Baffle’s?” asked Maury.

“You don’t forget a name like that.”

“Thanks!” said Maury, shaking the guard’s hand. “You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“Have fun,” said the guard. “Every now and then I go looking for my boyhood too, though it’s more likely to be found at a shuttered comic book store, or maybe over at Soldier Field.”

I knew what he meant. The Bears were still playing at Wrigley Field back then, but half the fathers in Chicago taught their kids to drive in the Soldier Field parking lot on weekends.

We trudged out the door and walked over to State Street. Then Maury had to stop and grab a lamppost for support.

“Nate,” he said, “I hate to ask, but do you have enough cash for another cab ride? We’ve got to be five or six blocks away, and I don’t think I can make it that far.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it. How bad are the legs?”

“Pretty bad,” he admitted, leaning against the lamppost.

I flagged down a Yellow cab—I don’t think they have Checkers anymore—and had it take us slowly down the street. Maury kept his nose practically pressed against the right-hand window.

“Damn it, Nate!” he muttered as we passed the block where the Follies and the Rialto burlesque theatres used to be. “It’s not here! The old bastard lied to us!”

“Cabbie, stop here!” I said. (Well, actually I yelled it.)

We screeched to a stop, and Maury groaned as he practically got thrown into the front seat. “What the hell’s going on?” he muttered.

“You were looking out the wrong window,” I said—for there, on the other side of the street, was Alastair Baffle’s Emporium of Wonders, right next door to the shuttered Madame Fifi’s Palace of Delights.

“I’ll be damned!” said Maury, getting painfully out of the cab while I paid the driver. “Even I didn’t really believe it would be here.”

The cab pulled away, glad to be rid of two crazy old guys, and we hobbled across the street, both of us leaning heavily on our canes. The window wasn't much—a couple of kids' tricks, and posters of Houdini, Dunninger, and Blackstone—but that made sense. You didn't want to put anything too valuable in your window, not south of the Loop. It had been gentrified a few blocks farther on, but this was still a No Man's Land, not quite the Loop, not quite the elegant condos that had replaced most of the slums between there and Chinatown on Cermak Road.

I turned to Maury, whose eyes were as wide and bright as a kid who'd just discovered a candy store.

"You gonna stand out here all day?" I said. "What are we waiting for?"

He smiled, opened the door, and stepped into the Emporium of Wonders, with me right beside him.

The guy behind the counter had his back turned to us. "Look around, gentlemen," he said. "I'll be with you in a moment."

The place was smaller than the shop at the Palmer House, but it carried the same magical paraphernalia, the same production boxes, the same selection of wands. I felt like I was eleven years old again, and I could see Maury's arthritis almost visibly retreating from him.

Then the guy turned around, and I did a double-take. He was the spitting image of Alastair Baffle, even down to the little wart at the tip of his nose. He had to be a grandson, or maybe a great-grandson, but he was clearly related to the original.

"Ah!" he said. "Master Gold and Master Silver. Welcome back! Forgive me for saying it, but Time has not been as kind to you as you might have wished."

"You know us?" asked Maury.

"Certainly. You are Morris Gold, and *you*"—he turned to me—"are Nathan Silver. It is good to see you again. You grew up well, I take it?"

"We became partners," said Maury.

"Gold and Silver. Of course."

“How old are you?” I asked, frowning.

“As old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth.” It didn’t get a reaction, so he continued: “Edmund Gwenn said that in *Miracle on 34th Street*. A sweet man. He used to stop by the old shop in the Palmer House whenever he was performing on the Chicago stage.”

“How can you still be around, and looking exactly the way you looked seventy-five years ago?”

“I suppose I should say diet and clean living, but in point of fact I love to eat, I smoke Turkish cigarettes in enormous quantities, and I loathe exercise.”

“You haven’t got a magic trick for becoming young again, have you?” asked Maury with a smile.

“You couldn’t afford it,” said Baffle.

“Okay,” I said. “Who are you really?”

“I’ve already told you.”

“I know what you told me and it’s bullshit,” I said. “No one’s that old.”

He stared at me, not angrily, not annoyed, but coldly, like he was studying a bug. I figured I’d just stare him down, but somehow I couldn’t meet his gaze.

“Come on, Nate,” said Maury. “He’s the same guy. I remember him like it was yesterday.”

“Yeah?” I said. “Well, he’s not supposed to *look* like it was yesterday.”

“I see you have a wallet in your pocket, Master Silver,” said Baffle. He seemed amused—not like anything funny was happening, but just because he was making me so uncomfortable. “The last time we met you had something else in your pocket. Do you remember what it was?”

“Sure,” I lied. “What do *you* think it was?”

“A very racy paperback,” he said.

It sounded right.

“And the very first time?” he continued.

“How the hell should I know?” I said irritably, because I knew he was going to tell me, and that meant I was wrong and he really *was* Alastair Baffle.

“A Milky Way candy bar,” said Baffle. “It was a very warm day, and I told you that you must choose between eating the candy bar and handling a magic trick, but that you couldn’t do both because the chocolate was very soft and would stick to your fingers and then rub off on the trick.”

I just stared at him for a minute. “Damn,” I said at last. “I *do* remember that.”

“And you’re still here,” said Maury enthusiastically.

“The store is my life,” he replied. “Several of them, in fact.” He looked at Maury, whose face was suddenly tense. “I think you had better sit down on purpose, Master Gold, before you sit down by accident.” He produced a chair from somewhere and brought it over to Maury.

“Thank you, Mr. Baffle,” said Maury, almost collapsing into it.

“Call me Alastair. We need no formality between old friends. And old friends we are. How long has it been since you two first met in the Emporium?”

I was still trying to figure out where the flaw was, how he could present himself as maybe 140 years old and how I couldn’t disprove it, but Maury spoke right up.

“Seventy-eight years,” he said.

“How time flies!” said Baffle. “I would have sworn it was no more than seventy-four or seventy-five years.”

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to be funny, or if he meant it. While I was trying to figure it out, he spoke again.

“Well, what can I show you two today?”

"I don't know," I said. "Truth to tell, we really didn't expect to find you still in business." *Or alive.* "What have you got?"

"Everything," he said.

I spotted a production box with mirrors on the side, the kind that makes it seem like something is vanishing right before your eyes, rather than the more traditional box where the object simply disappears once it's briefly hidden from view. "How about this?" I said, pointing to the box.

He shook his head. "We can do better than that, Master Silver," he said. "When you were a child, you could be amused by a child's tricks. But you are an adult now, and you crave more than a momentary amusement, do you not?"

"What I crave and what I'm likely to be around for are two different things," I said wryly. "Maury, this was your idea. What trick do *you* want to see?"

"I'll leave it up to Mr ... to Alastair," said Maury, his fingers starting to twist the way they did whenever the arthritis got really bad.

"Tricks are for children," said Baffle, "and you have outgrown them." He paused. "I think today I shall show you some of my wonders for adults." He turned to study the shelves behind him. The top shelf was shrouded in darkness, though the rest of the room was well-lit. On the next shelf was a trio of shrunken heads; one of them stuck its tongue out at me, and another giggled.. There was a miniature ping-pong table, not a foot long, with tiny paddles and a ball the size of a bee-bee; as I looked at it, the two paddles started a vigorous volley. There was a candy cane that changed into a snake, then an arrow, and then back to a candy cane. "Cecil B. DeMille should have visited my store before filming *The Ten Commandments*," remarked Baffle, holding up the candy cane. "This is much more colorful than the simplistic prop Charlton Heston used." It morphed into a belt, then back into a candy cane again, and he laid it on a shelf.

"What else can it do?" asked Maury, as wide-eyed and eager as he'd been seventy-eight years ago.

"Party tricks," said Baffle contemptuously. "Nothing for adults." He walked to the far end of the counter, picked up a small jar, and brought it back, setting it down on the counter next to Maury.

"What is it?" I asked.

“Unless I miss my guess, and I rarely do, it is something you were discussing just yesterday,” answered Baffle.

“Jesus!” exclaimed Maury. “Take a look, Nate!”

I walked over and peered into the bottle.

“It’s *him*, Nate!” said Maury excitedly. “And he’s calling his shot, just like in the ‘32 World Series!”

And there was the Babe, maybe half an inch high, pointing out to all the fans exactly where he was sending the next pitch. It wasn’t static, either. The shortstop was thumping his glove, the umpire was signaling Ruth to stop pointing and take his stance.

I looked up at Baffle. “How did you do that?” I asked.

He looked amused, and I felt like an insect again. “With mirrors.”

“What the hell kind of answer is that?” I demanded.

“The kind you paid for, and worth every penny of it.”

I pulled a five out and laid it on the counter.

“Okay,” I said. “*Now* how did you do it?”

“I’m sorry, Master Silver,” he replied, “but I never offer two answers to only one question.” He pushed the bill back to me.

“What else have you got?” asked Maury.

“Any number of things,” answered Baffle. “Now, where is my Morris Gold collection. Ah!” He reached up to a higher shelf, grabbed some sheet music, and held it up for us to see. “The song you never composed.” Then a book. “The novel you never wrote.” A look of infinite sadness crossed his face as he displayed the photograph of a small boy. “The grandson you never had.”

“He looks a lot like Mark,” said Maury. Mark was the son he lost in Vietnam. “Who is it?”

“I just told you.”

“But I never had a grandson.”

“I know,” said Baffle. “So of course the photo never existed.” He blew on it, and it vanished right in front of us.

“I thought you weren’t going to show us any tricks today,” I said..

“And I haven’t,” he answered. “Tricks are for children.”

“Then what do you call what you’re showing us?”

He pointed to a trio of murky glass jars. “Hopes. Dreams. Regrets.”

“Seriously, how did you pull that off?” I persisted.

“Seriously?” he repeated, arching an eyebrow and seeming to look right through me to some interior spot that nobody was ever supposed to see. “You take two well-meaning but unexceptional lives, stir in all the might-have-beens and never-weres, baste lightly with the optimism of youth, the cynicism of maturity, and the pessimism of age, add a soupaon of triumph and a cup of failure, heat the oven with vanished passion, sprinkle with just the tiniest pinch of wisdom, and there you have it.” He smiled, as if totally pleased with his explanation. “Works every time.”

It sounded like a salesman’s line of bullshit, but I could tell that Maury had bought every word of it. His eyes shone, his face glowed, and he was eleven years old again, hanging on Alastair Baffle’s every word.

“I hate to rush you,” said Baffle, “but it’s almost time to feed the banshee and the gorgon.”

“Can we see them?” asked Maury.

“Perhaps,” said Baffle. “But I rather suspect they will look exactly like cats to you.”

“And to everyone else?” I suggested.

“It depends on whether they can see past the surface of things.”

“Were you always this quick with a slick answer?” I said, annoyed that even after all these years it all still mystified me. My brain kept saying *illusions* and something else kept whispering *magic*.

“No, Master Silver,” he replied. “But then, you were not always this quick with a sarcastic question.”

“In some circles sarcasm is considered a sign of intellect,” I said defensively.

“Those aren’t circles, Master Silver,” responded Baffle. “You just can’t see all the angles from inside them.”

Maury groaned just then. I turned and saw that his body was all twisted up the way he gets when he’s in pain. I pulled a couple of pills out of his pocket and popped them into his mouth.

I waited a minute, then said, “Did that help?”

He grimaced. “Not much. It’s bad this time, Nate.”

“I’ll take you home,” I said.

“Yeah, I think you’d better.”

Suddenly Alastair Baffle was standing between us and the door. “I just want to say what a pleasure it has been to see my two old friends once more,” he said. “And I hope to see you again in the future.”

“Don’t count on it,” I said grimly. “I think this was our last foray into the world, such as it is.”

“Then at least let me shake your hand good-bye,” he said, grabbing my hand. He turned to Maury. “And yours, Master Gold.”

Maury looked scared to death—he hated to be touched when he was in this much pain—and I took a step forward to stop Baffle from taking his hand. But he gently pushed me aside—I say “gently” because he didn’t seem to use any force, but I had a feeling he could have pushed an elephant aside with as little effort—and he flashed Maury a smile.

“Have no fear, Master Gold. I’ll be very careful.”

He reached out and put Maury’s twisted, bony, crumpled hand in his own. I’ve seen the nurses do that on occasion: Maury always screams, and half the time he passes out. But this time he didn’t yell, didn’t faint, didn’t even groan. He just looked at Baffle with the strangest expression on his

face, as if he was watching his first magic show again, and the world was young and filled with infinite promise.

I escorted him out to the street and flagged down another cab. When I turned around to start helping him into the back seat, I found him standing erect, not using his cane at all. He was holding his hand up and flexing his fingers over and over, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

I had a lot of questions to ask Alastair Baffle, but I suddenly heard the lock click in the door, and when I turned to face it he'd already hung up his "Gone to Lunch" sign.

* * * *

I couldn't believe the change in Maury. That night he skipped two of his strongest pain medications, and the next afternoon he actually shuffled a deck of cards. He hadn't been able to do that in years. The doctors claimed that it was a semi-miracle, that sometimes arthritis went into remission—but never this fast or this completely. Maury listened politely to them, but when we were alone together he told me that there was no question in *his* mind that it was all due to Alastair Baffle.

He cashed a couple of bonds—I don't know what he was saving them for anyway—and the next week we went down to the Emporium of Wonders again.

"Welcome back, my once-young friends," said Baffle as we entered the shop. "What shall I show you gentlemen this time?"

"Anything you want," answered Maury.

"Let me think," said Baffle. "Ah! I have just the thing!" He went into his back room and emerged a moment later with a small white lab rat in a cage that could have held a sixty-pound dog.

"The Neptunian Spin-Devil," he announced. "One of the rarest creatures in the Solar System, if not the galaxy."

"Sure it is," I said in bored tones.

"You doubt it?" he asked in that tone that made me feel like he was a cat playing with its food, and that I was its meal.

"Of course I doubt it."

“Oh, ye of little faith. What troubles you about it?”

“Other than its appearance, you mean?” I said. “Does it breathe?”

“Certainly,” replied Baffle. “Why should you ask, Master Silver?”

“Because Neptune is a gas giant with no oxygen.”

Baffle looked genuinely surprised. “Really?”

“Really,” I said.

He shrugged. “Well, they *told* me it was Neptune, but I suppose it could just as easily have been Pollux IV.”

“Come on,” I said. “It’s a white mouse, and it’s from the pet shop down the street.”

“If you say so, Master Silver,” said Baffle. Suddenly he leaned over the cage and said “*Boo!*”

The mouse became a tawny fifty-pound *something* in the blink of an eye, growling, spinning in circles, flapping two sets of vestigial wings.

“What the hell *is* it?” I demanded.

“I already told you,” answered Baffle with a smug smile. “You live in a changing universe, Master Silver. You must never assume that all things change at the same pace.”

He held the Spin-Devil up for Maury to see, then carried its cage to the back room.

“This guy is half nuts and wholly dangerous,” I whispered to Maury. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“You do what you want,” he replied. “He’s a miracle worker, and I need another miracle. I’m staying.”

I could see it was pointless to argue with him, so I just sat and stared at a tribal death mask that was hanging on the wall, and tried to ignore the feeling that it was grinning at me.

“You’re looking better today, Master Gold,” said Baffle when he’d rejoined us. “I am delighted to see that your condition was not permanent.”

“It was until I met you,” said Maury.

“I’m flattered that you should think so,” said Baffle, “but I’m just a shopkeeper. And now that I’ve displayed today’s wonder, what trick can I sell you?”

“I can’t see out of my right eye,” said Maury. “Glaucoma, macular degeneration, I don’t know. Bunch of long words that don’t mean anything. Do for my vision what you did for my arthritis.”

Baffle smiled. “You want a god,” he said. “I am merely a shopkeeper.”

“I want a miracle. You’re in the miracle business.”

“I am in the magic business.”

“Same thing,” insisted Maury.

“Ask for some other trick,” I said, getting annoyed with Maury’s worshipful attitude. “I’ll bet he could make a blind man lame.”

“Your cynicism does not become you, Master Silver.” Baffle reached into his pocket, pulled out a tiny jar that seemed to be filled with dust, and handed it to Maury. “Put a minuscule pinch of this in a glass of water tonight and rinse your eye out. It may ease the pain.”

“I’m not *in* pain,” replied Maury. “I’m blind.”

“I am not a doctor,” said Baffle apologetically. “This is the only eye illusion I know.”

Maury took the powder home, rinsed his eye out with it—and the next morning he could see.

* * * *

Maury cashed all his investments—there weren’t that many—and started going back to the Emporium every few days, sometimes with me, sometimes alone when I just couldn’t face another day of his idolizing

Baffle. He started taking long vigorous walks at night, and doing push-ups and sit-ups in the morning. It used to be when we'd try to assemble our all-time greatest Bears team he'd forget that Gale Sayers and Walter Payton played the same position, or he'd think Sid Luckman had been Lucky Sid Somebody-or-other—but now he was sharp as a tack. How many states did Harry Truman win in 1948? Michael Jordan's scoring average during the first championship season? Rosemary Clooney's first gold record? He knew them all.

Alastair Baffle never offered to sell me a trick, and I never offered to buy one. Maury kept urging me to, but I figured I'd spent more than ninety years picking up all these aches and pains, and I'd *earned* them. But it was difficult, seeing Maury grow stronger and healthier each day. I was always the bigger and stronger one, and now for the first time in my life I wasn't able to keep up with him. I mean, hell, even his hair got thicker. The first time someone asked if he was my son it was everything I could do not to club both of them with my cane.

And then one day he was gone. I knew he'd left to visit Baffle—it was the only place he ever went—but that night he didn't come home. He didn't call, and the next morning the home reported him missing to the police. Didn't do a bit of good. No one could turn up any trace of him.

But *I* knew where he was. After two more days, I went out the back way, made it to the corner like all the other times, and hailed a cab. Ten minutes later it dropped me off on State Street in front of the Emporium of Wonders. The door was locked, the windows were empty, and there was a sign on the door: *Moved to a New Location*. But it didn't say where the location was.

I tried the yellow pages. No luck. I tried the white pages too. Hell, if there'd have been mauve or puce pages, I'd have tried *them* too. I spent the next two weeks wandering the area, asking every person I saw if they knew what had become of Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders. They were polite at first, but pretty soon they started looking at me like I was the local nut case, and they turned and began walking away whenever they saw me approaching.

I stayed in the Hector McPherson Retirement Home for seven more months. Since I had a two-bedroom apartment they kept trying to give me a new roommate, but Gold and Silver had been a team since before any of them were born and I wasn't about to adjust to a new partner.

Then came the day I'd known was coming. The doctor hemmed and hawed, and then laid it on me: the cancer had reappeared in my one remaining lung. I asked how long I had. He tiptoed around it for a few minutes, then said anywhere from three weeks to three months. I wasn't even sorry; nine decades is a long time, longer than most have, and life hadn't been much fun since Maury had left.

It was getting harder to breathe, harder to get around. Then I read in the paper that they were bringing *Casablanca* back to a small theatre in what used to be Old Town, the beatnik/then-hippie/then-yuppie area a couple of miles north of the Loop. It had played on TV a couple of trillion times, but this would be its first commercial showing on a big screen in almost forty years, and I thought to myself: where better to die than watching Bogey and Claude Rains go off into the unknown to cement their friendship and fight the Bad Guys, just the way Maury and I daydreamed when we were kids?

I became obsessed with the notion that that was how and where I wanted to die. I waited a few more days, until I barely had the strength to climb down the stairs. Then, when the nurses and attendants were all performing their various duties, I walked out the front door, and waited for the cab I'd phoned. (I wasn't sure I'd have the strength to stand out there in the cold and flag one down.)

I gave the cabbie the address of the theatre, and he dropped me off there fifteen minutes later. I gave him a twenty, stuffed a ten for the movie and another twenty (just in case I didn't die and needed a ride home) in my shirt pocket, and walked to the ticket window. When I got there I stopped and turned around, to take one last look at the world—

—And that's when I saw it, nestled between an old-fashioned greengrocer and a little hardware shop: Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders. I walked across the street and peered in the window. It looked exactly like the last shop. I studied the door for a long moment, then finally opened it and walked in.

"Master Silver," said Baffle, looking totally unsurprised as I entered the place. "What kept you?"

"Life," I wheezed.

"It does slow people down," he agreed, and he sounded sympathetic rather than intimidating. "Well, come in out of the cold. Someone's been waiting for you."

“Maury?”

He nodded. “I had my doubts, but he assured me that sooner or later you’d show up.”

A young boy who looked oddly familiar entered from the back of the shop. He smiled at me, and I knew I’d seen that smile a million times before.

“Maury?” I said, half amazed, half frightened.

“Hi, Nate,” he said. “I knew you’d come.”

“What happened to you?”

“I’m working here now,” he said. “Full time.”

“But you’re an old man!”

“You know what they say,” he replied. “You’re only as old as you feel. And me, I feel like I’m twelve years, three months, and twenty-two days old.” He smiled again. “That’s how old I was the day we met. And now we’re meeting again.”

“Just briefly,” I said, getting ready to tell him about the cancer. “I got the bad news last week.”

“Then it’s last week’s news, and nothing is older than that,” said Maury with no show of concern.

“I must feed the Denebian Spider-Cats,” announced Baffle. “I’ll leave you two friends to visit in private for a few moments.”

I stared at Maury. “Didn’t you understand what I said? The cancer’s in the other lung. They’ve given me three months, tops.”

“Why don’t you ask Alastair what *he* can give you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look at me, Nate,” he said. “I’m not an illusion. I’m twelve years old. He did it for me. He can do it for you, too. I’ve asked him to hold a job open for you.”

“A job?” I repeated, frowning.

“A *lifetime* job,” he said meaningfully. “And around here, there’s no telling how long that can be. Look at him. You know he once saw George Washington ride by?”

“You better hope he was lying, Maury,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, confused.

“Don’t you understand just how long you have to serve him?”

“You make it sound like I’m a slave,” he complained. “I *love* working here. He teaches me things.”

“What kind of things?”

“You’d call them tricks, but they’re not.”

“You’d better come back with me, Maury.”

“So I can rot in my wheelchair while I’m going blind?” he said. “So I can’t even pick up a pencil without my hand feeling like it’s on fire? If I stay here I can be healthy forever!”

“Do you know just how long forever is?” I shot back. “Did you just sign the contract without reading the fine print? How long will it take you to pay off your debt to him? When will you be free to leave?”

“I don’t *want* to leave!” he half-shouted. “What’s out there besides pain and suffering?”

“*Everything’s* out there,” I answered. “Pain and suffering are just a small part of it. They’re dues we pay to enjoy the good stuff.”

“The good stuff’s over for sick old men like us,” said Maury. “You shouldn’t be trying to talk me out of staying here. I should be trying to get you to join me.”

“It feels like cheating, Maury. If there’s a God, I’m going to be seeing Him pretty soon, and I plan to do it with a clear conscience. We never cheated at business, I never cheated on my wives, and I’m not about to

start cheating now.”

“You’re looking at it all wrong,” he insisted. “If you don’t stay with me, you’ll be cheating yourself.” He paused. “I don’t know how long he’ll hold the job open, Nate. I don’t think he likes you very much.”

“I can live with that.”

“Damn it, Nate! You’re walking around with one lung, and it’s got cancer! You *can’t* live with it! You can’t live with anything. Come on while you have the chance. We can be Gold and Silver again for another lifetime!”

“I’m not through with *this* lifetime,” I said. “Maybe I’ve only got three months. Maybe they’ll come up with a new form of chemo, or some other new treatment. Life’s always been a crapshoot, Maury. I’ve played by the rules so far; I’m not changing now.”

“So what if they cure you?” he said. “They’ll give you another eight months. He can give you eight *decades*.”

Baffle re-entered the front of the shop just then. “I assume Master Gold has spoken to you about a position here?” he said.

“You don’t want a sick, tired old man,” I said.

“That’s true,” he replied. “I have no use for a sick, tired old man.” He paused. “But I can always use a young, healthy one.”

“I wish you luck in finding the right one,” I said. “But it’s not me. And now I think I’d better be going.”

“Without your trick?” asked Baffle.

“I’ll have to take a pass on it,” I said. “I’ve got just enough cash with me for the movie across the street and cab fare home.”

“Then you can owe it to me.” He reached into the air and produced a single red rose, then handed it to me. “Careful of the thorns,” he cautioned.

“I saw you do this the very first time I visited your shop,” I said.

“No, Master Silver,” he said. “Each time is different. Smell the fragrance.”

"I can't," I said, indicating my oxygen supply.

He reached over before I could stop him, grabbed the oxygen away, and tossed it in a wastebasket. "We don't allow oxygen around here, Master Silver. It's too combustible."

I was all set to grab my throat and start gasping for air, but nothing happened except that I took a deep breath. It felt good. Hell, it felt *great*.

"Now how does it smell?"

I lifted the rose to my nose. "Beautiful," I said in wonderment.

"You owe me a dollar the next time you visit the shop."

"Nate," said Maury, "are you sure you won't stay?"

"I can't," I said. "Are you sure you won't go?"

He shook his head.

I didn't know whether to shake his hand or hug him, so I just stared at him, fixing his face in my memory one last time, and then I walked out the door.

* * * *

I went in to start my treatment two days later. The doctors took a bunch of CATscans and X-rays, blood tests and readings, and left me sitting there for hours. Finally the head of the team came out and told me that their initial diagnosis had been mistaken, that I didn't have cancer after all.

The next morning I took a cab to the shop to pay Baffle his dollar. There was a sign in the window: *Moved to a new location*.

I keep looking. Not to take him up on his offer, just to pay him what I owed him, and maybe see Maury one more time and find out how he was doing. I heard Baffle had opened a store on Morse Avenue in the Rogers Park section of the city, but when I got there he'd moved again.

Someone told me that a new magic shop opened down in Hyde Park, in the University area, and as soon as I'm up to it I'll go down and see for

myself. It'll probably be gone by then. I don't think he wants me to find him. Maybe he's afraid I've changed my mind. As for me, I don't know what I'd say to them—the man who happily sold his soul, and the man who bought it.

But I'd give one of my remaining months just to take one last look around Alastair Baffle's Emporium of Wonders.