

The First Two Pages of “Behind the Magic 8-Ball” by Marcia Talley
From *Chesapeake Crimes: Magic Is Murder*
edited by Donna Andrews, Barb Goffman, and Marcia Talley (Wildside Press)

An Essay by Marcia Talley

First, a little background information.

The Chesapeake Crimes short story series was introduced in 2010 and followed quickly by volumes 2 and 3. When discussions opened on what to do for the next book in the series—“Volume 4” seemed a little too ho-hum—the editors, Donna Andrews, Barb Goffman and I, decided it would be fun if the stories submitted were tied to a theme. Consequently, *They Had It Coming* featured tales of justifiable homicide: everybody knows someone who has to die, right?

The collections that followed were fairly self-explanatory: *This Job is Murder*, *Homicidal Holidays*, and *Storm Warning*. The 8th collection, *Fur, Feathers and Felonies*, featured animals of all kinds, followed by *Invitation to Murder* which required that someone in the story either send or receive an invitation. The 11th in the series, which is being edited now for publication in 2023, is delightfully sports-themed: *Three Strikes You’re Dead*.

But let’s get back to *Magic is Murder*, book 10.

When Barb, Donna and I settled on the idea of murder stories featuring magic, I was delighted. I’d done a lot of research into magicians and illusionists for my novel

Dark Passage and had material left over. A title sprang immediately to my mind:

Abracadaver! I knew my protagonist would be an amateur magician, but it didn't occur to me until I was well along in the story that he'd be investigating his own murder.

As with many short story anthologies these days, submissions to the Chesapeake Crimes anthology series are blind, so it's important to catch the attention of the panel of independent judges from the get-go.

My story opens with Lisa speaking:

Almost a year had gone by since Tommy had dressed in his track suit, laced up his Nikes, and jogged into the path of a late-model SUV and out of my life forever.

But his things remained.

Lisa, Tommy's widow and our narrator, has agreed to let Missy, her friend and co-worker, help clear out Tommy's closet and donate some of his stuff to a church charity: "If it doesn't spark joy . . ." she says. Lisa agrees, although she's not quite sure what an Uzbekistani peasant will do with Tommy's tuxedo. By the end of page two, Lisa has wrestled a mysterious suitcase out of the closet and onto the bed, and it's soon clear that this is Tommy's old magic kit.

"Tommy dabbled in magic in high school," I explained. "By the time he got to college, he was a hot property on the corporate, restaurant, and birthday party circuits." I paused. "He billed himself as The Amazing Thomaso."

While Lisa is reminiscing over the magical contents of her dead husband's suitcase, Missy knocks something off a high closet shelf and onto Lisa's toe. It's a Magic 8-Ball. Surprisingly, Missy has never heard of such a thing.

"It's a magic oracle," I whispered, channeling a Gypsy fortune-teller. "Past, present, or future, the 8-Ball knows all." I held it in front of her. We watched as from a sea of deep-blue liquid a message gradually materialized in a clear round window set into the bottom of the ball: *Concentrate and ask again.*

In my research, I learned that the Magic 8-Ball was invented back in the forties by the son of a famous clairvoyant, Albert Carter in partnership with Abe Bookman, a saavy businessman who took Carter's "Liquid Filled Dice Agitator" and turned it into a "Miracle Home Fortune Teller." Today, the 8-Ball is owned by Mattel, who claims to sell a million Magic 8-Balls every year. In 2011, *TIME* magazine named the Magic 8-Ball as one of the All-*TIME* 100 Greatest Toys.

You, too, can own a Magic 8-Ball, available wherever "novelty toys" are sold. But, will you believe, like Missy, that *it's nothing but a fancy-dancy paperweight?*

Let me ask the 8-Ball. "Are you for real?"

You may rely on it.

It could be all the wine she's consumed, of course, or the dry martini chaser, but Lisa is unnerved when:

I leaned over the ball, made my voice deep, dark, and spooky. "Is there a ghost in the room trying to communicate with us?"

Yes, definitely, the Magic 8-Ball confirmed, not being one to quibble.

The Magic 8-Ball has twenty possible responses: 10 affirmative answers , 5 non-committal answers, and 5 negative answers, such as *Concentrate and ask again* and *Reply hazy, try again*. I had enormous fun writing the dialogue for Lisa's conversations with the Magic 8-Ball, observing how she gets around its obvious limitations:

How I longed at that moment for an ouija board, for its tear-shaped planchette sliding easily around the board, spelling out the murderer's name, letter by incriminating letter.

Instead, she has to ask yes or no questions in order to solve the case.

By now, you might be wondering why my story in this collection is titled "Behind the Magic 8-Ball" rather than "Abracadaver." As the editors, myself included, were reading the other stories selected for inclusion in *Magic is Murder*, it was immediately apparent that "Abracadaver" was a perfect fit for the story by Alan Orloff featuring an actual magician, so Barb came up with an alternate title for mine, almost as clever. Never fear. Alan adequately compensated me for his use of "Abracadaver" by buying me a fancy drink with an umbrella in it at the Bouchercon Bar.

Does the 8-Ball approve?

Yes, definitely.

The First Two Pages of "Behind the Magic 8-Ball"

Almost a year had gone by since Tommy had dressed in his track suit, laced up his Nikes, and jogged into the path of a late-model SUV and out of my life forever.

But his things remained.

“It’s amazing how much stuff you accumulate in a five-year relationship,” I said to Missy, my coworker and best friend. Only eleven o’clock on a Saturday morning, but I’d already liberated a bottle of Moët from the fridge, left over from the office Christmas party, the last time we three—and seventy of our closest friends—had been together.

I poured a glass of bubbly for each of us, then sat down next to her at my kitchen island. I raised my glass. “To Tommy!” I said, clinking my glass against hers. “May there be thirty-six-hole golf courses in heaven.”

“Or wherever,” Missy added.

“Don’t be mean,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “It’s not Tommy’s fault that you lost the Barton account. If that asshole, Parker, hadn’t gotten stinking drunk and thrown up all over the—”

Missy held up a hand, cutting me off. “I’m sorry, Lisa. You’re absolutely right. But Tommy egged Parker on, you have to admit that. Cheers to this, cheers to that, cheers to that other thing,” she sing-songed, waving her wine glass like a conductor’s baton.

“Apology accepted,” I said and drained my glass. I peered into the bottom, wondering if it had sprung a leak, then reached for the bottle. “And thanks for the moral support today.”

“You had to get around to it sometime,” she said, offering her glass for a top up.

“It” was going through Tommy’s closet and getting rid of his things.

Missy had turned up that morning, armed with cardboard boxes, heavy-duty lawn and leaf bags, and a can-do attitude. Saint Columba’s was having a clothing drive for victims of the earthquake in Uzbekistan, she announced. Perfect timing, in her opinion. Two and a half glasses of champagne later, I agreed with her.

We emptied Tommy’s dresser drawers in short order—socks, undershirts, BVDs, and tees—then turned our attention to his closet. I bundled up sports jackets, chinos, belts, and ties without a qualm, but when it came to his dress shirts, I paused. I reached for the sleeve of one of Tommy’s signature light-blue Oxford button-downs, pressed it against my nose, and inhaled, savoring the familiar spring-washed scent from We Mean Clean in the village. “I don’t know about these,” I said, glancing helplessly at my friend.

“Ruthless,” Missy said. “If it doesn’t spark joy—”

“I know, I know. Out it goes.” I closed my eyes, slipped the shirts off their hangers, and handed them over.

My husband, the victim of an unsolved hit-and-run, had been buried in his best blue suit, of course, but what would an Uzbekistani peasant do with his tuxedo? I consulted Missy.

She held a bag in both hands, jiggled it for emphasis.

In went the tux, fancy garment bag from Nordstrom and all.

“What’s on the shelves?” With a sidewise nod, Missy indicated the stacks of boxes that, in spite of their differing sizes (or perhaps because of it: Tommy had been kind of a neat freak), were slotted together like blocks in a Jenga game.

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. “They’ve been sitting up there since Tommy moved in. Let me get the footstool from the kitchen.”

By the time I got back, Missy—who was a good six inches taller than I was—had successfully slid a box from the bottom of one of the stacks and, propping it up against her chest, lifted the lid. “Term papers,” she announced, digging deep into the pile with her free hand. “Who holds on to these things?” She produced a thick, spiral-bound document and, squinting, read from the cover: “‘American Magic, Technology, and Popular Science in the Machine Age with Special Reference to—’ My gawd! I didn’t know Tommy went to Duke.”

“Yeah,” I said, taking the box from her outstretched hands and setting it down on the dresser. “Here, let me.” I motioned Missy aside, positioned the footstool in front of the open closet door and climbed aboard. One at a time, I handed boxes down to Missy, who arranged them on the bed. The last item, a hard-side aluminum case with snap locks, required extra effort but with Missy’s assistance, was relocated to the bed as well.

I dusted off my hands. “Well, where to begin?”

“This suitcase looks promising.” Missy pressed the appropriate button, but the locks didn’t pop up. “Damn. It’s locked.”

“Why don’t you check out a couple of boxes while I fiddle with the combination?” I grinned. “Tommy’s repertoire in that department was limited. He used to drive the IT techs crazy.”

Tommy’s case flirted with the maximum size the airlines count as carryon and had a three-digit tumbler lock. While I experimented with Tommy’s go-to combinations, Missy threw herself into her assignment with enthusiasm, snatching lids off boxes willy-nilly. “Jigsaw puzzles,” she announced. “A box of Legos! Another box of Legos! A shoeshine kit! And this one has a pair of hiking boots.”

I was hunched over the case, setting the dials to our wedding date when Missy said, “Tah dah! How do I look?”

I glanced up. Missy was wearing a top hat and waving a magic wand.

“Watch closely. In the blink of an eye, all these boxes shall vanish! Abracadabra!”

I laughed out loud.

“Tommy dabbled in magic in high school,” I explained. “By the time he got to college, he was a hot property on the corporate, restaurant, and birthday party circuits.” I paused. “He billed himself as The Amazing Thomaso.”

Missy giggled. “I would pay extra to see that. Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“See Tommy’s act?”

I shook my head. “No. That was before my time.”

Still wearing the top hat, Missy wandered over to supervise my efforts on the case. “I’ll bet that’s his magic kit.”

“I bet you’re right,” I said as I pressed the button and the locks popped open.

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Marcia Talley is the Agatha and Anthony award-winning author of *Disco Dead* and eighteen previous novels featuring Maryland sleuth, Hannah Ives. She is editor/author of two collaborative serial novels, *Naked Came The Phoenix* and *I’d Kill For That*. Her short stories appear in more than a dozen collections. Marcia has been involved in one way or another with the Chesapeake Crimes series ever since 2010, when the first volume was published. *Magic is Murder* is number ten in this popular, award-winning series.

Marcia is past-president of Sisters in Crime, Inc. and currently serves as president of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of Mystery Writers of America. She divides her time between Annapolis, MD and a quaint, Loyalist-style cottage on Elbow Cay in the Bahamas.

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