

## **"Howard's Fun Shop"** **By Geoffrey Grimes (2000)**

Lennie Deaver fell in love with magic when "Doc" Howard, the "World's Greatest Magician," invited him up on stage to help him make the Hindu princess, asleep in a deep trance, float effortlessly high above the audience in the school cafeteria. After the show, Lennie's whole life became magic. "I'm going to be the *second* greatest magician in the world," he told Mandy, as he wrapped a large bath towel in a makeshift turban around his head.

Just a week later, he began his collection of magic tricks at Howard's Fun Shop, the only magic store in town. Howard's Fun Shop was everything Lennie or any other boy could imagine in a mysterious house of magic. It was tucked away in a shabby corner of half abandoned shops and stores in the old warehouse section of Houston. Its high glass front door squealed on rusty hinges, and a cowbell clanked overhead as each eager apprentice stepped inside. Six old worn display cases, three in a row on the left and three others on the right, formed the center aisle. Two more were lined up shoulder to shoulder in the rear. A thin tube of soft neon light illuminated the contents of each case--old packs of playing cards, fake cigarette lighters that sprouted little bouquets of paper flowers, colorful, sponge balls and stacks of golden brass cups, black magic wands and collapsible "silk" top hats, white, furry puppet bunnies, and the like. On shelves behind the cases stretched the rows of books, magazines, and catalogs on every kind of magic--rope magic, silk magic, the magic of rings, floating ladies, the mysteries of the Hindu rope trick revealed, the Arabian magic carpet, the secrets of the world's greatest escape artists. On the very top shelves rested the most mysterious tricks of all--color-changing silk tubes, sword boxes, broad chrome chafing dishes, grizzly head choppers--all under the gaze of a giant papier-mâché Chinese dragon head with searching, suspicious eyes and menacing, red fangs. Behind the back center case was a doorway, draped by a musty, black curtain, split down the middle. A school kid on his or her first excursion could only guess at what lay cloaked behind that wonderful blind.

"Doc" Howard, the performer featured in the assembly program, had operated the magic store for more than twenty years. Every Saturday morning, he could always be found in the rear of the store entertaining three or four neighborhood kids and their dads, spreading a fan of playing cards across the face of a black flannel cloth. "Now watch carefully!" he would caution. "Don't take your eye off the ace of spades!" And instantly, that same ace of spades disappeared under his fingers, only to flash from behind some unsuspecting ear, or pop up out of the front shirt pocket of a dad who had stepped too close to the action. "Doc's" assistant, standing discretely aside, always excited the first round of applause.

For \$4.50 Lennie bought his first three magic tricks: "The Disappearing Nickel," the "Four Flying Aces," and "The Mystical Hanky," counting out the two one dollar bills and the rest of the change he had saved up from his allowance. For his birthday, Lennie's grandparents promised to give him a \$10 dollar gift certificate. He planned to spend it all at the magic shop. Every day for six months before his next birthday, Lennie poured over

the pages of the Fun Shop summer catalog, reading each description over and over again, studying the routines and trying to figure out how they worked. "Aladdin's Lantern," "The Vanishing Wand," the "Chinese Chafing Dish," the "Linking Rings," and the floating "Zombie Ball"--some day he would own them all and know their incredible secrets.

Lennie's sister, Mandy, fourteen-years old and a popular cheerleader in junior high school, detested Lennie's new hobby. She made fun of him each time her friends came over, spoiling each trick by telling her friends exactly what to expect and how each tricked worked before he even finished. The third time it happened, Lennie tore the towel from his head, threw it at her, and fled to his room in anger. Sometimes, he just hated Mandy Deaver! The next day, they had another big fight, and after he made one really ugly remark about her friend, Laura, Mandy swore at him and flushed his "magic goldfish," carved from the fat end of a carrot, down the toilet.

In flaming hot anger, Lennie almost ran the whole two miles to "Doc" Howard. He told him all about Mandy and her mean friends. He told him what Mandy did to his "magic goldfish." Lennie felt better when "Doc" pulled out a new trick from one of his display cases. It was the "Magic Golf Ball Trick" from the summer catalog. "Watch!" said "Doc" Howard. He placed the golf ball between his thumb and finger. When he shook his hand up and down, at once, the ball began to move, taking on a life of its own, jumping between one finger and the next and rolling all over and around his outstretched palm. Suddenly, the golf ball vanished from his left hand only to reappear in his right as two balls, then three, and finally four balls--a whole handful of shiny, white golf balls. "Wow!" said Lennie, amazed and delighted.

Then "Doc" really surprised him. He invited Lennie to step through the black curtain into his workshop where the old man built his larger illusions that he sold by mail order "just to the 'professionals'" and the even grander props that he used in his own stage shows. Fascinated, Lennie watched "Doc" as he adjusted the mechanism for his "floating lady" illusion and memorized every detail as the fuzzy, grey-headed old man demonstrated the "head chopper" and "silk production box."

The best, though, "Doc" Howard saved for last. He was working on a new "production act" with a set of four large screens and a large drapery that would feature the startling appearance of the Hindu princess who would "materialize right before the audience's very eyes." "Doc" Howard's own child-like eyes sparkled as he described each stage of the routine. "I'm coming to do the show at your school next month," said "Doc." "If your grandparents don't mind, why don't you be my assistant!"

"Do you mean it!" exclaimed Lennie. "Do you really mean it!"

"Oh, I think we could make some wonderful magic together!" said "Doc," patting Lennie on the shoulder. "'Doc' and his new assistant--Lennie, the magician! What do you say, partner?"

"You bet!" said Lennie. He couldn't believe it. "Doc" Howard was coming to Queens Elementary! Lennie was so surprised and excited! He couldn't wait to return home to tell his grandfather and to flaunt it before his sister, Mandy. What would she have to say about his magic, now!

When Lennie returned home, he found his grandfather waiting for him at the door and deeply disturbed. "There's been an awful accident," said his grandfather. "Mandy's hurt real bad!" said his grandmother sitting on the couch in a flood of uncontrollable tears. Lennie was frightened and started crying himself.

"What happened?" Lennie cried. "What happened to Mandy?" His grandfather explained that Mandy had to be rushed to the hospital following an accident on her bicycle. "She fell off her bike and landed hard on her back. The doctor said she had a 'ruptured kidney' and had to have a new one right away." His grandfather explained that someone in the family whose kidneys would "match" Mandy's would have to donate one. The grandfather's organs probably matched, but the doctor told him he was too old for the surgery. He explained to Lennie that he was probably the only other person who might be able to save his sister, but even if he agreed to be a donor, there was no guarantee that Mandy's body would "accept" the kidney. All at once, Lennie forgot about his awful feuds with Mandy. Everything was different now. Afraid of losing his sister, Lennie agreed to give Mandy one of his kidneys.

Lennie's grandparents rushed him to the hospital where a large lady in a cap and uniform took him and his grandparents up on an elevator, down a hall, and into a private hospital room. "You all can wait right here," she said. In a few minutes, a different nurse pricked his finger and drew some blood. Another one took his temperature and had him change his clothes. He felt awkward in the hospital gown. Still a third nurse came into his room with a clipboard full of papers that his grandfather had to sign.

All the time, he wished he could see his sister, Mandy. He wanted to hug her and tell her he really didn't mean what he had said about her friend, Laura. And it was okay if she didn't like his magic. Suddenly, Lennie started shaking. He felt cold. He looked around at the walls of the hospital room, at the curtains that stretched on a curved rod half way around his bed, and the dark screen of the television set mounted high above him up in the corner of the room. He was very nervous but was relieved when he heard a familiar voice at the door. When he turned his head, he was excited to see "Doc" Howard standing beside his bed. "Doc" stayed with him even as the nurses wheeled Lennie into "Surgery," his grandfather and grandmother close behind. "You'll be just fine," said "Doc," "and don't forget! I can't go on without my assistant!" Suddenly, he felt warm and grateful. "I have to go now, Lennie, and get ready. We've got a big job ahead of us, just the two of us, right?"

In the blinding, white-tiled room, Lennie suddenly fell asleep. When he woke up, he was back in the dull grey hospital room. As he tried to focus, he saw his grandparents and "Doc" Howard standing right beside him. He still felt a little groggy. "You came through the operation just fine!" exclaimed his grandfather, squeezing his right hand.

"You are a fine young man and a wonderful brother for Mandy," said his grandmother. Lennie was shocked to hear her name; he had forgotten about his sister. When he asked how she was, "Doc" Howard explained, "She's doing fine, real fine for right now, but it's too early to tell. We won't know for sure for another two weeks if her body will accept the kidney, but all the nurses are taking real good care of her. Don't you worry about her. You just need to get well now and get ready for our next show!" Then daydreaming about Chinese dragons, rice bowls, and linking rings, Lennie drifted off to sleep.

For the next four days, Lennie lay recovering in the hospital. Then, his grandfather came for him and took him home. The following Monday, the first day of the week before the big show, Lennie was able to return to classes.

News about Mandy and Lennie had spread all over town. Lennie's teachers gave him extra time to catch up on the assignments he had missed the week before. "Don't worry," said his teachers. "We're really proud of you—all of us!" they said, but privately, Lennie was very worried about Mandy. "She's going to be just fine," said his grandfather. Mandy was moved to a new room, but every time he went to see her, she was asleep. "She's going to be just fine!" said the nurse. "She just needs to rest and heal."

"Doc" Howard's Friday night program at Queens Elementary, however, could not have come at a worst time. Mandy was still in the hospital. On the morning of the big magic show, Mandy was moved back into Intensive Care again. She had developed a high fever the night before, and the hospital staff were very concerned. "This is the critical moment," the head nurse wrote on her clipboard.

"What should I do?" Lennie asked his grandfather. "What would Mandy want you to do?" asked his grandfather. Lennie was lost. He wanted to be with Mandy but couldn't see her, yet he didn't want to miss the magic show and let "Doc" Howard down. "Well, you can't go in to see her," said his grandfather, "but I think she would tell you, son, 'The show must go on!'"

That evening backstage, before the opening of the show, assistants were busy unloading the crates and positioning all the colorful, exotic props for the beginning of each act. One assistant finished setting the lift for the "floating lady," while another moved the great "head chopper" into place. Very quickly and orderly, the boxes and tubes and mysterious black-draped and golden fringed tables were lined up and secured for quick entrance behind the main curtain. At last, four stagehands moved the large screens into their mounts, and "Doc" reminded him of his part. "This will be the last illusion, our greatest act! As soon as the screens are in place, and the assistants raise their arms, you take the corner of the drape and pull it down fast!"

Lennie tried to listen, but his thoughts were on Mandy back in the hospital. "The show must go on!" he heard her say.

Then, suddenly, he was at full attention. He was about to become a part of magic history. "This is the first time tonight," thought Lennie, and he hoped he wouldn't make a mistake. "Doc" looked at him reassuringly and said, "I think we are all in for a big surprise!"

Lennie stood backstage as "Doc" started the tape recorder. At the climax of the music, an assistant pulled on the main rope, and the great curtains separated, revealing "Doc" Howard, looking very grand in his black and white tuxedo. The old magician stepped forward, bowed deeply, and then, motioning with his hand behind him, he beckoned Lennie to come forward.

"Let me introduce you to my special assistant this evening—Lennie, the magician." Then Lennie stepped forward into the same spotlight beside "Doc" Howard and into his proudest moment ever.

"Oh, if only Mandy could see me now!" he said to "Doc." "She wouldn't make fun of me anymore!"

"No, I don't think so," said "Doc" smiling at him as he patted him on the shoulder. "No, tonight, Mandy would be really proud!" said "Doc."

"I wish I had some magic that would make her well again," said Lennie, as a big tear streaked down his cheek. His grandmother and grandfather clapped and clapped with the other members of the audience filling the school cafeteria.

"Maybe you do!" whispered "Doc" Howard. "Maybe you do!" They both bowed deeply, the old man squeezing Lennie's right hand reassuringly.

The magic show was a big success. Each act received wonderful applause. "Doc" Howard knew how to organize the program so that each act was bigger and its "effect" grander and more surprising than the one just before it. At the end of each illusion, he could hear the "oooh's" and "ahhhh's." Lennie kept losing count at about fifty or so as he tried to count the people in the audience.

At last the time came for the new illusion, "'Doc' Howard's Chinese Visitation." The curtain opened, and Lennie stepped forward as four assistants rolled the platform with its four tall screens positioned in a great, four-sided box. Huge, golden dragons with blazing red eyes and forked tongues crawled across the front side of each of the tall, jet-black screens.

As the music began, the "Chinese" assistants turned the platform around and around so that the audience could see all four sides. They lifted the light, fabric-covered screens from their slots in the platform and paraded each across the stage, turning as they proceeded left to right, displaying the innocence of both sides of each panel. Then, they returned the screens and placed them once again into their original slots.

The music kept playing as another assistant, dressed in baggy scarlet silk pants and tightly buttoned blue silk blouse, brought forth the folded drapery. She opened it up by its corners, and with the help of a second assistant, stretched it out to its full width and laid it over the top of the screens, letting it hang evenly to the floor in front and behind.

Once again, the assistants turned the platform. The music neared its climax. At just the right moment, the assistants rolled the platform to the very center of the stage, then stepping aside, raised their arms wide.

This was his cue. This was the moment he had been waiting for. The spotlight wheeled over to Lennie. He could feel his stomach twitching and his heart pounding. He was so excited! Lennie stepped forward to the left corner of the drape and grabbed the heavy black canvas in both hands, just as "Doc" had rehearsed him. Down he yanked on the drape with all his strength. The cloth mantle collapsed, and the four screens underneath fell outward and crashed down on the floor on each side of the platform.

The heavy drape settled over a massive, hulking shape in the middle of the platform, and a gasp went up through the audience. Quickly, the assistants pulled out the screens stretched across the stage floor while two others lifted and pulled away the drape up and behind the massive form revealing two human figures. There stood "Doc" Howard wearing a hospital gown and cap, a stethoscope hanging from around his neck, and in front of him, sitting proud and straight up in a gleaming chrome wheelchair, beamed Mandy, his sister!

"It's Mandy!" came a chorus of cries across the cafeteria. "It's Mandy! It's Mandy!" exclaimed the sixth-grade girls in Lennie's class.

The audience went wild! Everyone jumped up, applauding and cheering as "Doc" Howard wheeled Mandy to the footlights out on the apron of the stage. Lennie was so surprised! He ran to his sister and hugged and hugged her neck. "Doc" Howard walked over to the microphone at the left side of the stage, leaving the second spotlight fixed on Mandy and a speechless Lennie.

"Tonight is a special night," said "Doc" Howard. "Tonight, we have all learned the secrets of real magic. I guess I've been a magician just about all my life. I started when I was just a school-age boy like Lennie. I practiced and practiced, learning everything I could when I was a youngster. I went to the library and checked out every book I could find. When the magic show came to town, I sneaked into the back rows. I saw the great Houdini, the greatest escape artist in the world. I was hypnotized by the illusions of Harry Blackstone and Howard Thurston. I knew more magic as a teenager than Mark Wilson in the "Magic Castle." I was a good friend of "Ducky" Waterman, the president of the International Brotherhood of Magicians."

"When I grew up, I became a doctor, but I never lost my love for magic. So, years ago, I opened up the Fun Shop. Lots of boys and girls like Lennie have come to the Fun Shop each year, but I knew that when I met Lennie, I had met a very special young

man. He proved that to all of us last month when Mandy was in an awful accident. Mandy needed a new kidney, and Lennie was the only one who could save her life. This morning, it didn't look very good for Mandy, but Lennie knew that the "show must go on!" Just before the beginning of the show, Mandy's nurse called me to tell me that her fever had broken, that Mandy was going to be all right . . . thanks to Lennie, the Magician!"

Lennie couldn't wait any longer. He ran over to Mandy and hugged her around her shoulders. Mandy reached up and kissed Lennie on the cheek. "You're the greatest magician in the world!" she cried.

Lennie just beamed.

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