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Barty wanted to hug her. He did hug her. He hugged Angel, too. He hugged Tom Vanadium..Jacob scared people. He was 'Edom's identical twin, with Edom's boyish and pleasant face, as soft-spoken as Edom, well barbered and neatly groomed. Nevertheless, on the same mission of mercy as Edom, Jacob would leave the pie recipients in a state of deep uneasiness if not outright terror. In his wake, they would bar the doors, load guns if they owned any, and lay sleepless for a night or two..Jacob was hiding something. Until he had spoken of Josef Krepp, his every response had been formed as a question, which had always been his preferred method of avoidance when conversation involved a subject that made him uncomfortable..a deeply troubled John Wayne while the delightful David Niven floated along overhead in a basket suspended from a huge, colorful hot-air balloon..The gurney, one wheel rattling. The young orderly behind it, dressed all in white. And the nurse again..Every time Junior glanced back, Vanadium was following his wake through the throng. Stocky but almost gliding. Grim and grimmer. Hideous. And closer..A table candle glowed in an amber glass. To Nolly, in this glimmering light, Kathleen's face was more radiant than the flame.. "Will do. Check out those paintings he collects. People pay real money for them, even people who've never been in a looney bin." Wally's help, not just with the apartment, but with his time and love, had made an incalculable difference..Shortly after Agnes turned out the light, she said, "Kiddo, it's been one whole week since you walked where the rain wasn't, and I've been doing a lot of thinking about that." "Yes?" the silver-haired eminence replied, wrinkling his nose as though he suspected that this customer would ask if the display pedestal was included in the price..Mustering all her hostess skills, Agnes gradually turned the conversation from disastrous explosions to Fourth of July fireworks, and then to reminiscences of summer evenings when she, Joey, Edom, and Jacob..Junior was impressed and delighted by her clever assumption of it strictly professional voice and demeanor, which convincingly masked her intense desire. Sweet Victoria was a worthy coconspirator..This unflinching consistency of packaging enables card mechanics, professional gamblers, sleight-of-hand magicians-to manipulate a new deck with confidence that they know, starting, where every card can be found in the stack. An expert mechanic with practiced and dexterous hands can appear to shuffle so thoroughly that even the most suspicious observer will be satisfied-yet he will still know exactly where every card is located in the deck. With masterly manipulation, he can place the cards in the order that he wishes, to achieve whatever effect he desires.."You must be thinking of someone else," she said, pushing a wad of bills into his hand. "Me, I'm a jellyfish in high heels." "Sometimes these sympathetic vibrations are very apparent, but alot of the time, they're so subtle that you can hear them only if you're unusually perceptive." She protested that her ruined body had neither any comforts to offer a man nor the strength to be a bride..He was, admittedly, surprised that Nurse Bressler was strongly compelled to come on to him even though she had read his patient file and knew that he'd recently been a veritable geyser of noxious spew, that during the violent seizure in the ambulance, he had also lost control of bladder and bowels, and that he might at any moment suffer an explosive relapse. This was a remarkable testament to the animal lust he inspired even without trying, to the powerful male magnetism that was as much a part of him as his thick blond hair..She only half understood their frantic conversation, partly because the ability to concentrate was draining from her along with her lifeblood, but also because she was distracted by Joey. He was no longer in the wreck, but standing at the open rear door of the ambulance..Packed full of aftermath, the movie was too violent for Junior's taste. He had wanted to meet at a showing of Doctor Dolittle or The Graduate. But Google, as paranoid as a lab rat after half a lifetime of electroshock experiments, insisted on choosing the theater..The nurse was in was gone, but Maria remained in attendance. She the vinyl-and-stainless-steel armchair, busy at..Aftermath had a way of being discovered, often at the worst of all possible moments, which he had learned from movies and from crime stories in the media and even from personal experience. Discovery always brought the police at high speed, sounding their sirens and full of enthusiasm, because those bastards were the most past-focused losers on the face of the earth, utterly consumed by their interest in aftermath..His profession was cocktail piano, though he didn't have to earn a living at it. He had inherited a fine four-story house in a good neighborhood of San Francisco and also a sufficient income from a trust fund to meet his needs if he avoided extravagance. Nevertheless, he worked five evenings a week in an elegant lounge in one of the grand old hotels on Nob Hill, playing highly refined drinking songs for tourists, businessmen from out of town, affluent gay men who stubbornly continued to believe in romance in an age that valued flash over substance, and unmarried heterosexual couples who were working up a buzz to ensure that their rigorously planned adulteries would seem glamorous..He had been surprised to learn her age. She didn't appear to be that old. Thirty or not, Victoria was unusually attractive.."But let's pretend it's me, okay? So here I am, stepping off the curb without looking both ways-" He knew for a fact that Seraphim had died in childbirth. He had seen the gathering of Negroes at her funeral in the cemetery, the day of Naomi's burial. He had heard Max Bellini's message on the maniac cop's Ansaphone..In the foyer, Hanna Rey and Nellie Oatis sat side by side on the stairs. Hanna, the housekeeper, was gray-haired and plump. Nellie, was Perri's daytime-companion, could have passed for Hanna's sister..Celestina hadn't noticed the infant being taken away. She had wanted to see it once more, even though she was sickened by the sight of it..Junior would have liked to pursue spiritual matters with Sklent, but numerous other partyers wanted their time with the great man. In parting, sure that he would give the artist a laugh, Junior withdrew the brochure for "This Momentous Day" from his jacket and coyly asked for an opinion of Celestina White's paintings..Neddy favored a quick greeting, two curt pumps, but Junior held fast after the handshake was over. He didn't grind the musician's knuckles, nothing so crude, just held on pleasantly but firmly. His intention was to confuse and further rattle the man, taking advantage of his obvious dislike of having his personal space encroached upon, in the hope that Neddy would

reveal why he'd been watching Junior so intently from across the room..Choking fumes, blinding soot. A licking heat told him that slithering fire had followed the smoke up the stairs and now coiled perilously close in the murk.."Money's no object. I can afford whatever you'd like to charge. And I'd be a diligent student."..Sklent proved to be angry, suspicious, volatile, but also a man of tremendous intellectual power. A profound and dazzling conversationalist, he rattled off breathtaking insights into the human condition, astonishing yet unarguable opinions about art, and revolutionary philosophical concepts. Later, except in the matter of ghosts, Junior would not be able to remember a single word of what Sklent had said, only that it had all been brilliant and really cool.."What kept me going these past two and a half years was knowing that I could get my hands on Mr. Cain when I was finally well enough to do something about him."..After carefully wiping her fingers on a paper napkin, Maria examined the garments with interest. She carried her living as the seamstress at Bright Beach Dry Cleaners. At the sight of each rent, popped button, and split seam she clucked her tongue..Too late. The parsonage was fully engulfed. With luck, they would save the church..The sleeves of the pajama top were pushed up, revealing more of the disease's vicious work. The muscles of her useless left arm had atrophied; the once graceful hand curled in upon itself, as though holding an invisible object, perhaps the hope she never abandoned..As always, curious about how others lived-or, in this case, had lived-Junior explored the house, poking in drawers and closets. For a widower, Bartholomew Prosser was neat and well-organized..Now, on his kitchenette table, two nights after Maria's reading, Jacob finished integrating the four decks as he had done Friday in the dining room of the main house. His work completed, he sat for a while, staring at the stack of cards, hesitant to proceed..As he was wheeled headfirst into the operating room, Barty raised off the gurney pillow. He fixed his gaze on his mother until the door swung shut between them..The deejay announced song number four for the week: the Beatles' "She's a Woman." The Fab Four filled the Studebaker with music..Agnes was only thirty-nine years old, full of plans and vigor, so Angel's words seemed premature. Yet in too few years, she would have reason to wonder if perhaps these gifted children foresaw, unconsciously, that she would need the comfort of having witnessed this climb..She felt that she had failed her sister. She didn't know what more she could have done, but if she'd been wiser and more insightful and more attentive, surely this terrible loss would not have come to pass..Struggling to keep a grip on consciousness, Junior told himself to focus on the future, to live in the future, free of the useless past and the difficult present, but he could not get into the future far enough to be in a time when the pain was no longer with him..Convinced he was alone and unobserved, Junior leaned into the car and shifted it out of park. He released the hand brake..At worst, Vanadium might begin to wonder if Junior had a link to Seraphim, might uncover the physical-therapy connection, and in his paranoia, might erroneously conclude that Junior had something to do with her traffic accident. That was nuts, of course, but the detective was evidently not a rational man..Even as this news pleased Junior, it also saddened him. He was not merely interring a lovely wife, but also his first child. He was burying his family.."It's chilly and foggy and late, and there might be villains afoot at this hour," he intoned with mock gravity. "The two of you are Lipscomb women now, or soon will be, and Lipscomb women never go unescorted through the dangerous urban night."..Repressing a smirk, feigning a respectful solemnity, he dared to glance at Vanadium, but the detective stared into Naomi's grave as though he hadn't heard the mockery-or, having heard it, didn't recognize it for what it was..Barty wore elfin-size, knitted blue pajamas complete with feet, white rickrack at the cuffs and neckline, and a matching cap. His white blanket was decorated with blue and yellow bunnies..The doors slid open, and they rolled Barty corridor to corridor, past the scrub sinks, to a waiting surgical nurse in green cap, mask, and gown. She alone effected his transfer into the positive pressure of the surgery..The calls to Bellini in San Francisco and to others in Oregon were made with a prayer for news, but the prayer went unanswered. Cain had not been seen, heard from, smelled, intuited, or located by the pestering clairvoyants who had attached themselves to the sensational case..He wasn't afflicted with parenthood envy. A baby was the last thing he would ever want, aside from cancer. Children were nasty little beasts. A child would be an encumbrance, a burden, not a blessing..Shortly before three o'clock, Thursday afternoon, in a state of agitation, Barty raced into the kitchen, where Agnes was baking buttermilk-raisin pies. Holding Red Planet open to pages 104 and 105, he complained urgently that the library copy was defective. "There's twisty spots in the print, twisty-funny letters, so you can't just exactly read all the words. Can we buy our own copy, go out and buy one right now?"..Junior was accustomed to having women seduce him. His good looks were a blessing of nature. His commitment to improving his mind made him interesting. Most important, from the books of Caesar Zedd, he had learned how to be irresistibly charming..Paul knelt on one knee beside her wheelchair. "This momentous day, Agnes. This momentous day, with all of its beginnings. Hmmm?"..Kid's room. Bartholomew's room. Furniture in cheerful primary colors. Pooh posters on the wall.."Our new roof," Bill said, pointing overhead, "will hold through any hurricane. Fine work. You tell Agnes what fine..As a matter of principle, Junior considered firing the slit-mouthed troll on the spot, but then Magusson said, "You shouldn't be bothered any further by Detective Vanadium."..When Agnes groaned, one of the shadows spread its wings, moved closer, to the right side of the bed, and resolved into a nurse. Agnes's vision had cleared. The nurse was a pretty young woman with black hair and indigo eyes.."December 1, 1958, in Chicago, Illinois, a parochial-school fire killed ninety-five."..Deed flinched. "No reason. But I sure never did mean you or your husband any harm, Mrs. Lampion. And not your baby, either, not little Bartholomew."..This Monday morning in Oregon was bleak, with the swollen, dark bellies of rain clouds swagging low over the cemetery, a dreary send-off for Naomi, even though rain was not yet falling.."I can't.".. "I'm gonna dream about baby chickens," she told Celestina, "and if I'm all yellow, they'll think I'm one of them."..Apparently, he didn't lean back far enough, because amazingly he landed on his feet in the winter-faded grass. The shock buckled him, and he dropped to his knees. Still cradling Grace, he lowered her to the ground as gently as he'd ever lowered fragile Perri onto her bed-quite as if he had planned it this way..inking?

The sequined and tasseled hat of fame was too gaudy for her; she was a minister's daughter, from Spruce Hills, Oregon, more comfortable in a baseball cap. This philosophy had worked for him previously, but forgetting the aftermath was more difficult when the aftermath was your own poor, torn, severed toe. Your own poor, torn, severed toe was infinitely more difficult to ignore than a busload of dead nuns. The pewter bludgeon slammed into the back of his skull with a hard pack. The scalp tore, blood sprang forth, and the man fell as hard as Victoria had fallen under the influence of a good Merlot, although he went facedown, not faceup as she had done. Now, here, lying on a bed in the emergency room of a Sacramento hospital, on a Saturday afternoon only six weeks before the camellia festival, Junior suffered under the care of a resident physician who was so young as to raise the suspicion that he was merely playing doctor. "Fourteen. It's usually the family that's behind an expression of the calling at such a young age, but in my case, I had to argue my folks into it." Paul told us the night he first came to the parsonage. About Agnes here ... and what had happened to Barty. And all about his late wife, Perri. I feel like I know Bright Beach already. Nor could she begin to imagine the nature of the disaster that had befallen him, leaving his face looking blasted and loose at all its hinges. She had last seen him at Phimie's funeral. A few minutes ago at her doorstep, she'd recognized him only because of his port-wine birthmark. Sitting on a stool at the counter, he ordered a cheeseburger, coleslaw, french fries, and a cherry Coke. A pink spot in the center of Victoria's forehead marked the point of impact. Soon it would be an ugly bruise. The skull bone did not appear to have been cratered. Lipscomb turned to Celestina. "Before lapsing into semicoherence again, your sister said, 'Beezil and Feezil are safe with her,' which may sound less than coherent to you, but not to me." For a while, she couldn't get enough air. Felt suffocated. She drew great, raw, shuddering breaths, and thought that she would never be able to quiet herself but quiet came. Furious, he squeezed off two shots. Passing the living-room archway, Tom saw Jacob in the armchair, under the reading lamp, slumped as if asleep over the book. His crimson bib confirmed that he wasn't just sleeping. The lid of the cooler wasn't on as tight as it ought to have been. From around one edge slipped a thin and sinuous stream of smoke. Something on fire. He could have killed someone named Henry or Larry, without risk of creating a Bartholomew pattern that would prickle like a pungent scent in the hound-dog nostrils of Bay Area homicide detectives. But he restrained himself. Dr. Walter Lipscomb's fingers were longer and more supple than the pianist's, and he had the presence of a great symphony conductor for whom a raised baton was superfluous, who commanded attention by the mere fact of his entry. A tower of authority and self-possession, he said to the becalmed Neddy, "I am this child's physician. She was born underweight and held in hospital to cure an ear infection. You sound as if you have an incipient case of bronchitis that will manifest in twenty-four hours, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to be responsible for this baby being endangered by viral disease." "I can talk to you," he said to Salk. "You'll understand. She was hero, the only one I ever knew till I met you. I've read about them all my life, in pulp magazines and paperbacks. But Perri ... she was the real thing. She didn't save tens of thousands-hundreds of thousands of children like you've done, didn't change the world as you've changed it, but she faced every day without complaint, and she lived for others. Not through them. For them. People called her to share their problem, and she listened and cared, and they called her with their good news because she took such joy in it. They asked for her advice, and though she was inexperienced, really, so short of experience in so many ways, she always knew what to say, Dr. Salk. Always the right thing. She had great heart and natural wisdom, and she cared so much." Tom removed the lid. No beer, one head. Simon Magusson's severed head lay faceup on the ice, mouth open as though he were standing in court to object to the prosecution's line of questioning. Apparently Maria wished that she'd brought a rosary to dinner. With the fingers of her right hand, she pinched the knuckles of her left, one after the other, as if they were beads. Something was very wrong with her, and she tried to speak, but again her voice failed her. This morning, Damascus had left the house early, before Vanadium came downstairs, which was perfect for Junior's purposes. While the maniac cop was finishing his shave and shower, Junior crept upstairs to check his room. He discovered the revolver in the second of the three places that he expected it to be, did his work, and returned the weapon to the nightstand drawer in precisely the position that he had found it. Narrowly avoiding an encounter with Vanadium in the hall, he retreated to the ground floor. After some fussing over the most effective placement, he left the quarter and the luggage-just as Vanadium, the human stump, clumped down the stairs. Junior experienced an unexpected delay when the detective spent half an hour making phone calls from the study, but then Vanadium went into the kitchen, allowing him to slip out of the house and complete his work. were uniformly negative, frequently hilarious, but never as succinct and violent as Sklent's. The beetle-green Pontiac waited in the driveway, with a shine that tempted nature to throw around some bad weather. Joey always kept a spotless car, and he probably wouldn't have had time to earn a living if he had resided in some shine-spoiling climate rather than in southern California. "Why do you think he's spending his money for all this tricky stuff?" Kathleen wondered, not for the first time. The bandaged man stormed up from the ruin of the living room, gauze fluttering around his lips as his hard exhalations seemed to prove that he wasn't a long-dead pharaoh reanimated to punish some heedless archaeologist who had ignored all warnings and violated his tomb. So this wasn't a Weird Tales moment. Missing windshield. Considering that the space was pinched by the crumpled roof, however, and in light of Agnes's pregnancy and imminent second-stage labor, the severe contortions involved in this extraction would be too dangerous. Junior's attorney-Simon Magusson--insisted upon full disclosure of maintenance records and advisories relating to the fire tower and to other forest-service structures for which the state and the county had sole or joint custodial responsibility. If a wrongful--death suit was filed, this information would have to be divulged anyway during normal disclosure procedures prior to trial, and since maintenance logs and advisories were of public record, Hisscus and Knacker and Nork agreed to provide what was requested. Shivering, Junior slammed the trunk lid and warily surveyed the lonely landscape. Black pines spread bristled arms through the

cherry night, and the moon cast down a jaundiced light that seemed to obscure more than it illuminated..At the bed, he spread the garment across his pillow. Lying down, he pressed his face into the sweater. The sweet subtle scent of Naomi was as effective as a lullaby, and soon he dozed off..In the passenger's seat, Barty was cushioned in his mother's arms. At times, the boy cooed or gurgled, or made a wet chording sound..With great deliberation, Joey shifted gears and followed the drive way to the street, where he peered left and then right with the squint-eyed suspicion of a Marine commando scouting dangerous territory. He turned right..Before he could replay the memory for further contemplation, Junior saw Ichabod exiting the house. The man returned to the Buick, seeming to float through the mist, like a phantom on a moor. He started the engine, quickly hung a U-turn in the street, and drove uphill to the house from which he had earlier collected Bartholomew..After a minute, he slipped his hand into his pocket. The quarter was still there..He either detected their well-concealed surprise or assumed they would be curious as to why, in spite of extensive surgery, he still wore this Boris Karloff face..Yet through the summer of 1966, following this call, he acted like a man who was haunted. A sudden draft, even if warm, chilled him and caused him to turn in circles, seeking the source. In the middle of the night, the most innocent of sounds could scramble him from bed and send him on a search of the apartment, flinching from harmless shadows and twitching at looming invisibilities that he imagined he saw at the edges of his vision..Her hands were locked together in her lap, gripped so tightly for so long that the muscles in her forearms ached. "What's wrong?".The middle finger on his right hand throbbed under the pair of Band-Aids. He'd sliced it earlier, while using the electric sharpener to prepare his knives, and the wound had been aggravated when he'd had to strangle Neddy Gnathic. He would never have cut himself in the first place if there had been no need to be well-armed and ready for Bartholomew and his guardians..The following morning, he canceled his German lessons. It was an impossible language. The words were enormously long.. "So I drew attention to myself. Raised suspicions. One night, in St. Louis, this rube recognized me from my performing days, even though I'd changed my looks. It was a high-stakes game, but the players weren't high-class. They ganged up on me, beat me, and then smashed my hands, one finger at a time, with a tire iron..".The coin stopped turning across his knuckles and, as though with volition of its own, it slipped into the tight curve of his curled forefinger. With a snap of his thumb, he flipped the quarter into the air..If he had cut himself intentionally for the express purpose of writing the name in blood, then the reservoir of anger was deeper still and pent up behind a formidable dam of obsession..At home, after phoning her folks, Celestina made a ham sandwich. She ate a quarter of it. Then two bites of a chocolate croissant. One spoonful of butter pecan ice cream. Everything was without taste, more bland than Phimie's hospital food, and it cloyed in her throat.. "I'm not. I'm just going to be the conscience that Enoch Cain seems to have been born without..".He got behind the wheel of the Studebaker, started the engine, did a hard 180-degree turn, using more lawn than driveway, and cried out in terror when Vanadium moved noisily in the backseat..They were inseparable, her son and this cherished girl, as they had been virtually since the moment they had met, more than six years ago. The special perception that they shared--all the ways things are-accounted for part of their closeness, but only part. The bond between them was so deep that it defied understanding, as mysterious as the concept of the Trinity, three gods in one..The fact that Barty saw twisty spots with either eye closed had prepared Agnes for this bleak news. Yet in spite of the defense that foreknowledge provided her, the teeth of sorrow bit deep..LATE TUESDAY AFTERNOON in Bright Beach, as a darker blue and iridescent tide rolled across the sky, seagulls rowed toward their safe harbors, and on the land below, shadows that had been upright at work all day now stretched out, recumbent, preparing for the night..She remained fixated on the card that she had just dealt, and for a while she didn't speak, as though the eyes of the paper knave held her in thrall. Finally she said, "Monster. Human monster..". "Well, it still is to me. But what I've been wondering ... when you talk about all the ways things are ... is there someplace where you don't have this problem with your eyes?".With a thin hiss of disgust, Junior pulled away from the thing, whatever it was, withdrew the flashlight from his belt, and listened intently for sounds in the alleyway. No voices. No footsteps. Only distant traffic noises so muffled that they sounded like the grunts and groans and low menacing growls of foraging animals, displaced predators prowling the urban mist..Though she was only a week past her third birthday, Angel always selected her own clothes and carefully dressed herself. Usually she preferred monochromatic outfits, sometimes with a single accent color expressed only in a belt or a hat, or a scarf. When she mixed several colors, the initial impression that she gave was of chromatic chaos-but on second look, you began to see that these unlikely combinations were more harmonious than they had first seemed..The chest respirator, which Joshua had evidently applied, lay discarded on the bedclothes beside her. She seldom required this apparatus to assist her breathing, and then only at night..EARTHSEA.Tom Vanadium was too unnerved by the Cain scare to be interested in the newspaper anymore. The strong black coffee, superb before, tasted bitter now..Agnes, Celestina, and Grace were soon working together with a harmony that was kitchen poetry. Paul had noticed that most women seemed to like or dislike one another within a minute of their first encounter, and when they found one another companionable, they were as open and easy on their first meeting as though they were friends of long duration. Within half an hour, these three sounded as if they were of one age, inseparable since childhood. He had not seen Grace or Celestina free of despair since the reverend's murder, but here they were able for the first time to veil their anguish in the bustle of baking and the pleasure of making a new friend..Saturday morning, he walked to a drugstore in town and purchased eight decks of cards. With four, he passed the day re-creating, again and again, what he'd done at the dining-room table the previous evening. The four knaves never appeared..Between his surgeries and for many months thereafter, Vanadium had devoted his energies to speech therapy, physical rehabilitation, and the concoction of periodic torments for Enoch Cain, which Simon Magusson was able to implement, every few months, through Nolly and Kathleen. The idea wasn't to bring Cain to justice by torturing his conscience, since he'd allowed his conscience to atrophy a long time

ago, but to keep him unsettled and thereby magnify the impact of his first face-to-face encounter with the resurrected Vanadium. In the execution, he was likewise scrupulous, for he didn't want the grownups to see what Angel saw; he preferred they believe it was sleight of hand-or magic. After the usual moves, he briefly closed his right hand around the coin, then with a snap of his wrist, flung it at Angel, simultaneously distracting with flourishes aplenty. During the walk home: slow and deep, breathing slow and deep, moving not at a brisk clip, but strolling, trying to let the tension slide away, striving to focus on good things like his full exemption from military service and his purchase of the Sklent painting. Celestina, the battering Baptist, back in action, came at him again. With one leg broken, another cracked, and the stretcher bar splintered, the chair wasn't as formidable a weapon as it had been. She swung it, Junior dodged, she struck at him again, he juked, and she reeled away from him, gasping. "The pepper tree had been whispering in the breeze, the roses nodding their bright heads. Now a stillness came into the cemetery, as if rising from beneath the grass, from out of that city of the lost. Risking all, he turned his back on her and fled, and in spite of his expectations to the contrary, she allowed him to escape. Agnes had lifted him to this perch. Now she smoothed his hair, straightened his shirt, and retied his loosened shoelaces, finding it even harder than she had expected to say what needed to be said. She thought she might require Dr. Chan's presence, after all. "Possible complications include cerebral hemorrhage, pulmonary edema, kidney failure, necrosis of the liver, coma-to name a few." He wanted, all right, but intuition warned him that he ought to continue to be discreet for a while longer. Champagne, then, and two shopping bags packed full of Armenian takeout. Sou beurek, mujadereh, chicken-and-rice biryani, stuffed grape leaves, artichokes with lamb and rice, orouk, manti, and more. Following a Baptist grace (said by Grace), Wally and the three White women, a fourth present in spirit, sat around the Formica-topped table, feasting, laughing, talking about art and healing and baby care and the past and tomorrow, while up on Nob Hill, Neddy Gnathic sat tuxedoed at a lacquered black piano, sprinkling diamond-bright notes through an elegant room. Now Junior threw back the covers and sprang out of bed. In double briefs, he restlessly roamed the hotel room. "I really am sorry about this," Junior said, regretting the necessity to deny her the right to look good at her own funeral, "but it's got to appear to be a crime of passion." This was not a ghost. This was not a walking dead man. This was something else, but until he knew what it was, who it was, the only person he could possibly look for was Vanadium. Junior hadn't noticed when the detective stopped turning the coin across his knuckles. Carrying him to the window, gazing up at the stars, the moon, she said, "I'll always read to you, Barty." Knacker, Hisscus, and Nork, all talking at once, then failing silent as if they were a single organism, then talking in rotation but interrupting one another, tried to advance their agenda. The machine, one in a bank of four, wasn't filled with ordinary newspapers, which cost only a dime, but with a raunchy tabloid aimed at heterosexual swingers. He wondered what it would be like to make love to Renee and kill her. Only once had he killed without good reason. And that had been one of the infuriating Bartholomews. Prosser in Terra Linda. A man. On that occasion, no erotic element had been involved. This would be a first. Number three on the charts was "Mr. Lonely," by Bobby Vinton, an American talent from Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. Junior sang along. Although he was a stranger, arriving unannounced, and something of an eccentric by anyone's definition, Paul was received by Grace and Harrison White with warmth and fellowship. At their doorstep, raising his voice to compete with the wailing weather, he hurriedly blurted out his mission, as if they might reel back from his wild windblown presence if he didn't talk quickly enough: "I've walked here from Bright Beach, California, to tell you about an exceptional woman whose life will echo through the lives of countless others long after she's gone. Her husband died the night their son was born, but not before naming the boy Bartholomew, because he'd been so impressed by 'This Momentous Day. And now the boy is blind, and I hope you'll be able and willing to give some comfort to his mother." The Whites failed to reel backward, didn't even flinch from his unfortunately explosive statement of purpose. Instead, they invited him into their home, later invited him to dinner, and later still asked him to stay the night in their guest room. Everyone confronted Agnes with expressions of puzzlement and expectation, and she looked from one to another. Paul. Maria. Francesca. Bonita. Grace. Edom. Jacob. Finally Celestina. By ones and twos, the festive crowd eventually deconstructed, but for Celestina, an excitement lingered in the usual gallery hush that rebuilt in their wake.

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