

PARTIAL OBJECTS

Celestina indicated to Tom that he should sit at the head of the table, facing Agnes at the foot. As Wally lowered himself into the empty chair to Tom's left, Celestina picked up two items from the sideboard and put them in front of Tom, before sitting to his right. Incredibly, Renee came after him, slinky and seductive, trying to calm him and lure him back into an embrace. On that busy night, with Vanadium's corpse in the Studebaker and Victoria's cadaver awaiting a fiery disposal at her house, Junior was too distracted to recognize the pertinence of the message. Now it tormented him from a dark nook in his subconscious. Wednesday, with a swiftness that confirmed its eagerness to make a deal, the state supplied records on the fire tower. For five years, a significant portion of the maintenance funds had been diverted by bureaucrats to other uses. And for three years, the responsible maintenance supervisor filed an annual report on this specific tower, requesting immediate funds for fundamental reconstruction; the third of these documents, submitted eleven months prior to Naomi's fall, was composed in crisis language and stamped urgent. Less cautious than the typical accountant, perhaps mellow in this season of peace, Prosser opened the door without hesitation. At the grave, they arrived with red and white roses. Agnes carried the red, and Barty brought the white. Admittedly, she had allowed herself to be disturbed by the fall of the cards, too. According them any credibility at all opened the door to full belief. Urgency gripped the paramedics. The rescuers' equipment and the pieces of the car door were dragged out of the way to make a path for a gurney, its wheels clattering across pavement littered with debris. The following April, when he proposed to her, she wouldn't have him. "You're sweet, Paul, but I can't let you throw your life away on me. You're this ... this beautiful ship that will sail a long way, to fascinating places, and I'd only be your anchor." The fire department. The firemen could come without sirens, quietly with their ladders, so as not to break Barty's concentration. He'd never taken too much from any one game. He was a discreet thief, charming his victims with amusing patter. Because he was so ingratiating and seemed only mildly lucky, no one begrudged him his winnings. Soon, he was more flush than he'd ever been as a magician. "Bullpoop might not be what they say, but it's the worst that we say. And in fact, in this house, bulldoody is preferred." Frantically, he squirmed around on the floor until he was facing the entrance to the kitchen. Through tears of pain, he expected to see a Frankensteinian shadow loom in the hall, and then the creature itself, gnashing its fork-tine teeth, its corkscrew nipples spinning. As always in uncertainty, she asked herself what her mother would do in this situation. Grace, of infinite grace, unflinchingly did precisely the needed thing, knew exactly the right words to console, to enlighten, to charm a smile out of even the miserable. Often, however, the needed thing involved no words, because in our journey we so often feel abandoned, and we need only to be reassured that we are not alone. After a minute, he slipped his hand into his pocket. The quarter was still there. It occurred to her that the knave had come, as foretold by the cards on that night long ago. She had expected the knave to be a man with sharp eyes and a wicked heart, but the curse was cancer and not a man at all. Junior knew that she must be teasing him. Her sense of play was delicious. Such devilry in her scintillant blue eyes, such sauciness. His enjoyment of the art was diminished by these associations, and as Junior turned away from Industrial Woman, his attention was suddenly captured by the quarters. Three lay on the floor at her gear wheel-and-meat-cleaver feet. They had not been here earlier. The man's voice echoed hollowly in Junior's ears, as if coming from the far end of a tunnel. Or from the terminus of a death-row hallway, on the long walk between the last meal and the execution chamber. While Jacob ate, he browsed through a new coffee-table book on dam disasters. He talked more to himself than to Barty and Angel, as he spot-read the text and looked at pictures. "Oh, my," he would say in sonorous tones. Or sadly, sadly: "Oh, the horror of it." Or with indignation: "Criminal. Criminal that it was built so poorly." Sometimes he clucked his tongue in his cheek or sighed or groaned in commiseration. Last night, in the superintendent's basement apartment, as they shared a bottle of wine, Sparky had told Vanadium numerous weird tales about Cain: The Night He Shot Off His Toe, The Day He Was Saved from a Meditative Trance and Paralytic Bladder, The Day the Psychotic Girlfriend Brought a Vietnamese Potbellied Pig to His Apartment When He Was Out and Fed It Laxatives and Penned It in His Bedroom She must have sensed his assessment of her and realized that she had little chance of charming him, for she turned at once away and never looked in his direction again. Scamp was a multitalented woman, with smoother skin than a depilated peach, with more delicious roundnesses than Junior could catalog, but she proved not to be the remedy for his tension. Only Bartholomew, found and destroyed, could give him peace. Tammy--the stock analyst, broker, and cat-food-eating feline fetishist-whom he had dated from Christmas of '65 through February of '66, had given him the timepiece in return for all the trading commissions and perfect sex that he had given her. Now, here on this sunny ridge in Oregon, miles from any train and farther still from any nuns, Junior applied this artistic insight to his own situation, overcame his squeamishness, and regained some momentum of his own. He approached his fallen wife, stood over her, and stared down into her fixed eyes as he said, "Naomi!". Then he curled up in one of the big armchairs in the living room and began the book again. This was the first time he had ever reread a novel--and he finished it at midnight. On Tuesday, less than twenty-four hours after Naomi's funeral, Knacker, Hisscus, and Nork--representing the state and the county held preliminary meetings with Junior's lawyer and with the attorney for the grieving Hackachak clan. As before, the well-tailored trio was conciliatory, sensitive, and willing to reach an accommodation to prevent the filing of a wrongful-death suit. Warily, Junior ventured into the gallery to make inquiries. He expected the staff to express utter bafflement at the name Celestina White, expected the poster to have vanished when he returned to the display window. Magically, a shiny quarter appeared in Thomas Vanadium's right hand. It turned end over end, knuckle to knuckle, disappeared between thumb and forefinger, and reappeared at the little finger, beginning its cross-hand journey once more. Odder yet, the pianist had studied him with a

keen interest that was inexplicable, since they were essentially strangers. When caught staring, he'd appeared rattled, turning away quickly, eager to avoid further contact..He felt lightheaded again. But this time he knew why. Not an oncoming case of the flu. He was straining against the cocoon of his life to date, straining to be born in a new and better form. He had been a pupa, encased in a chrysalis of fear and confusion, but now he was an imago, a fully evolved butterfly, because he had used the power of his beautiful rage to improve himself. When Bartholomew was dead, Junior Cain would at last spread his wings and fly..He wasn't entirely sure what all he hoped to find. Perhaps an envelope or a cash box with folding money, which a fleeing murderer would surely pause to take with him. Suspicions might be raised if he left it behind. Perhaps a savings-account passbook..He stopped for lunch at a restaurant with a spectacular view of the Pacific, framed by massive pines..This analgesic was among several prescription substances that he had stolen, over time, from the drug locker at the rehab hospital where he once worked. Some he had sold; these he had retained..After mentally reviewing what he must say, after working up a nervous edge, he dialed the SFPD emergency number.."It's what?" asked the detective, for with the exception of his teeth, he was not a self-improved individual..By the time he got back to Spruce Hills, the early night had fallen. The pearly, waxing moon floated over a town that glistened mysteriously among its richness of trees, flickering and shimmering as though it were not a real town, but a dreamland where a multitude of Gypsy clans gathered by the lambent amber light of lanterns and campfires.."Our little girl's going to walk backward her whole life if you drive in reverse all the way to the hospital." "He's an attorney, and this grieving husband comes to him with a big liability case. There's money to be made." Happy weekend. His attitude amazed her, and his strength in the face of darkness gave her courage..He'd acted boldly, recklessly, without scoping the territory to be sure Prosser was alone. The accountant lived by himself, but a visitor might be present..Junior stalked her, but she eluded him. Always, the song seemed to arise from the next room, but when he passed through the doorway into that space, the voice then sounded as if it came from the room that he'd just left..He wanted Celestina to sit in her seat and use her lap belt, but she insisted on cuddling next to him, as if she were a high-school girl and he were her teenage beau..When he woke in- the morning, he raised his head from the pillow to look at the alarm clock-and saw the twenty-five cents on his nightstand. Two dimes and a nickel..Nevertheless, being cautious even as he seized the day--or the night, in this case-he parked a short distance from his destination, on a parallel street. He walked the last three blocks..They had not come to Junior yesterday in their grief, if in fact they had thought to grieve..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..Although, by unspoken agreement, they avoided any talk of loss and death, the mood remained grim. Angel sat in thoughtful silence, pushing her food around her plate rather than eating it. Her demeanor intrigued Tom, and he noticed that it worried her mother, who put a different interpretation on it than he did..Dear Lord, how she loved her sugarpie, her little M&M. Three years had passed in what seemed like a month, and although there had been stress and struggle, too few hours in every day, less time for her art than she would have liked, and little or no time for herself, she wouldn't have traded being blindsided by motherhood for any amount of wealth, not for anything in the world ... except to have Phimie back. Angel was the moon, the sun, the stars, and all the comets streaking through infinite galaxies: an ever-shining light.."I find you more than adequate in all ways that count. Besides, Joey was a generous and good lover. What he taught me, I can share." She smiled. "You'll find that I'm a darn good teacher, and I sense in you a star pupil." 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..The water shut off, and Junior heard the ratcheting noise of a paper-towel dispenser..Her metal hands were still crossed defensively over her breasts. The artist had welded large hexagonal nuts to her rake-tine fingers to suggest knuckles, and balanced on one nut was a fourth quarter..On the other hand, killing a stranger like Bartholomew Prosser relieved stress better than sex did. Senseless murder was as relaxing to him as meditation without seed, and probably less dangerous..The boy-wonder physician turned to Junior again and assumed an expression of compassion so inauthentic that if he'd been playing a doctor on even the cheesiest daytime soap opera, he'd have been stripped of his actor's-union card, fired, and possibly horsewhipped on a live television special. "We'll be doing the procedure this afternoon, so I wouldn't want to give you anything much for the pain just prior to anesthesia and sedation. But don't you worry, Mr. Pinchbeck. Once we've lanced these boils, when you wake up, ninety percent of the pain will be gone." "Would you like a little tea and a piece of crumb cake?" Grace asked as smoothly as if, in *The Big Book of Etiquette for Ministers' Wives*, this were the preferred response to the announcement of a startling career change..She shook her head. "No way back." She pointed to the sketch pad on the floor. "I pushed him there." "I'm wondering," Nolly said, "if you're not an officer of the law anymore, in what capacity are you going to pursue Cain?" "Lock it anyway. And don't hang up. Stay on the line until the patrolmen get there." So it became dangerous to practice sorcery, except under the protection of a strong warlord; and even then, if a wizard met up with one whose powers were greater than his own, he might be destroyed. And if a wizard let down his guard among the common folk, they too might destroy him if they could, seeing him as the source of the worst evils they suffered, a malign being. In those years, in the minds of most people, all magic was black..Earlier in the week, Junior had looked up Thomas Vanadium in the telephone directory. He expected the number to be unlisted, but it was published..What he wanted more than a number was an address, and he found that as well..Move, move, like a runaway train, leaving the dead nuns--or at least one dead musician--far behind..Before Junior had become a physical therapist, he had considered studying to be a dentist. A low tolerance for the stench of halitosis born of gum disease had decided him

against dentistry, but he still could appreciate a set of teeth as exceptional as these..Maybes are for babies, Zedd tells us in Act Now, Think Later. Learning to Trust Your Instincts..If blood tests revealed that Junior wasn't the father, Vanadium would have a motive. It wouldn't be the right motive, because Junior truly hadn't known either that his wife was pregnant or that she was possibly screwing around with another man. But the detective would be able to sell it to a prosecutor, and the prosecutor would convince at least a few jurors..Or perhaps the sorrow was less sadness than yearning. He had to move on, but he was loath to begin this strange journey without her..No, impossible. He had killed Victoria almost a year and a half before this phone call. When you were dead, you were gone forever.."Well, anyway," she said, as though Muffins uncharacteristic viciousness had been adequately explained, "this mending ought to cover ten more lessons."First, he searched immediately around the dead man, figuring that the watch might still be snared on the coat belt or on one of the sleeve straps. No luck..Celestina sensed an easy camaraderie between these two men, but also tension that was perhaps related to the reference to an illegal search..He suspected the blame lay with his exceptional sensitivity to violence, death, and loss. Previously it manifested as an explosive emptying of the stomach, this time as a purging of lower realms..Magusson was a small man behind a huge desk. His head appeared too large for his body, but his ears seemed no bigger than a pair of silver dollars. Large protuberant eyes, bulging with shrewdness and feverish with ambition, marked him as one who'd be hungry a minute after standing up from a daylong feast. A button nose too severely turned up at the tip, an upper lip long enough to rival that of an orangutan, and a mean slash of a mouth completed a portrait sure to repel any woman with eyesight; but if you wanted an attorney who was angry at the world for having been cursed with ugliness and who could convert that anger into the energy and ruthlessness of a pit bull in the courtroom, even while using his unfortunate looks to gain the jurors' sympathy, then Simon Magusson was the counselor for you..Tom Vanadium was no alarmist, and the most logical explanation came to him first. Paul had wanted to learn how to roll a quarter across his knuckles, and in spite of being dexterously challenged, he practiced hopefully from time to time. No doubt, he had sat at the table this morning--or even last evening, before bed-dropping the coin repeatedly, until he exhausted his patience..He pointed at his feet. "Toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes, toes." WEDNESDAY, fully two days after delivering honey-raisin pear pies with Agnes, Edom worked up the nerve to visit Jacob..Sitting in Simon Magusson's mahogany-paneled office, reading the contents of this file, Junior was aghast. "I could have been killed." In the top drawer, in addition to the expected items, Tom Vanadium found a gallery brochure for an art exhibition. In the hooded flashlight beam, the name Celestina White seemed to flare off the glossy paper as though printed in reflective ink..Sobbing desperately, he dropped the telephone handset on the secretary, seized the dishtowel. He wrapped the cloth tightly around the shattered stump, applying pressure to diminish the bleeding.."Well, he was an insurance agent, and numbers are important in that line of work. And he was a good investor, too. Not the whiz you are with numbers, but I'm sure you got some of your talent from him."September 20, 1902, Birmingham, Alabama, church fire--one hundred fifteen dead. March 4, 1908, Collinwood, Ohio, school fire, one hundred seventy-six dead."He worked in your shipyard, your highness." Losen liked to be called by kingly titles.."As I explained, he might have thought I was you," Edom said, staring at the neatly ordered volumes on the nearby bookshelves.."You remember things?" the girl asked, her fingertips still pressed lightly to his cheek..RED SKY IN THE morning, sailors take warning; red sky at night, sailors delight..With a nimbleness and an alacrity that a lemur would have admired, the girl ascended to the first crotch..After examining Phimie, who was nauseous, Daines prescribed an anticonvulsant, an antiemetic, and a sedative, all intravenously..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..In spite of major earthquakes pending, explosions of dynamite hauling trucks on the highway, tornadoes somewhere churning, the grim likelihood of a great dam bursting along the route, freak ice storms stored up in the unpredictable heavens, crashing planes and runaway trains converging on the coastal highway, and the possibility of a sudden violent shift in the earth's axis that would wipe out human civilization, they risked crossing the boundaries of Bright Beach and traveled north into the great unknown of territories strange and perilous..Although, to her eyes, the natural world had an ominous cast this morning, she was also aware of its great beauty. She wanted Barty to store up every magnificent vista, every exquisite detail.."Now, I'm doubtless," Vanadium said, his voice returning to the uninflected drone that Junior had come to loathe but that he now preferred to the unsettling voice of quiet passion. "No matter what the situation, no matter how knotty the question, I always know what to do..She was sopping, shivering. Water streamed from her soaked hair, down her face, as she wiped at her beaded eyelashes with one dripping hand..He considered calling her, but he didn't know what he would say if she answered..Glorying in the cloudless day and the warmer than usual weather, he drove seventy miles north, through phalanxes of evergreens that marched down the steep hills to the scenic coast. All the way, he monitored the traffic in his rearview mirror. No one followed him..Shortly after six o'clock, Saturday morning, she stirred from a fretful dream and saw Barty sitting up in bed, reading..Dr. Lipscomb inclined his head slightly toward the pianist, in the manner of a stem headmaster about to emphasize a lesson with a sharp twist of the offending boy's ear. "Miss White and the baby will have vacated these premises by the end of the week-unless you insist on bothering them with your chatter. For every minute you harass them, their departure will be extended one day." WHEN AT LAST Paul Damascus reached the parsonage late Friday afternoon, January 12, he arrived on foot, as he arrived everywhere these days..As luck would have it," the nun said, "Dr. Lipscomb was in the when it happened. He'd just delivered another baby under.Judging by the sounds Vanadium made, Junior figured that the cop had settled once more into the armchair..The rain was colder than it had been earlier, almost as icy as sleet. Or perhaps she was far hotter than before and felt the chill

more keenly on her fevered skin. Each droplet seemed to hiss against her face, to sizzle against her hands, with which she tightly gripped her swollen abdomen as if she could deny Death the baby that it had come to collect. The wine tasted bitter, but Celestina knew that it was sweet. The bitterness was in her, not in the legacy of the grape. Tom Vanadium merely arched one eyebrow, as if to say that more than a single answer ought to be obvious. This Dry Sack-assisted effort at recollection, however, brought back to him one thing in addition to all the sweet lubricious images of Seraphim naked. The voice of her father. On the tape recorder. The reverend droning on and on as Junior pinned the devout daughter to the mattress. They introduced themselves as Knacker, Hisscus, and Nork, but Junior didn't bother to associate names with faces, partly because the men were so alike in appearance and manner that their own mothers might have had difficulty figuring out which of them to blame for never calling. Besides, he was still tired from his recent ramble through the hospital-and unnerved by the thought of some baleful-eyed Bartholomew prowling the world in search of him. "Then you have a big advantage, and you'll have to tell us all about yourselves," Agnes said. "I'll get the coffee brewing ... unless you'd like to help." The slow-motion death ballet, in which Bonnie and Clyde were riddled with bullets, was the worst moment Junior had ever heard in a film. He didn't see more than a brief glimpse of it, because he sat with his eyes squeezed shut. Nine days previously, at Google's instructions, Junior had rented boxes at two mail-receiving services, using the name John Pinchbeck at one, Richard Gammoner at the other, and then he had supplied those addresses to the papermaker. These were the two identities for which Google ultimately provided elaborate and convincing documentation. Chastened by these recent events, he vowed to stop meditating, to void all passive responses to the challenges of life. He must explore the unknown rather than flinch from it in fear. Besides, through his explorations, he would prove that the unknown was all just tapioca or applesauce, or whatever. Suitcases seemed to be missing. Some clothes, as well. Could mean a weekend vacation..with an encircling and suggestive lick, and then licked his lips, too, when the cold steel slipped free of them. The Church nourished the soul, while the occult nourished the imagination. In Mexico, where physical comforts were often few and hope of a better life in this world was hard won, both the soul and the imagination must be fed if life was to be livable. On January 2, 1968, four days before his birthday, Bartholomew Lampion gave up his eyes that he might live, and accepted a life of blindness with no hope of bathing in light again until, in his good time, he left this world for a better one. 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. Into the autumn of 1967, Junior reviewed hundreds of thousands of phone listings, and occasionally he located a rare Bartholomew. In San Rafael or Marinwood. In Greenbrae or San Anselmo. Located and investigated and cleared them of any connection with Seraphim White's bastard baby. Her brothers' solemnity irritated Agnes. They appeared to be taking this reading seriously, as though it were far more than just a little after-dinner entertainment. Junior must have shouted shut up more than he realized, because the neighbors began to pound on the wall to silence him. "Could you undo the spell you put on her?" Celestina stared out for a moment, and then turned her head to look at Tom, with both the shade of the night and the sparkle of the metropolis still captured in her eyes. "What was that all about?" 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. Martinis were ordered all around. None here observed a vow of absolute sobriety. "I'll come by at eight o'clock for breakfast," Wally suggested. "We have to set a date." Pity warmed the physician's ascetic face. "You loved your wife very much, didn't you?" This declaration was received seriously by Edom and Jacob, as if the devil often strolled the streets of Bright Beach and from time had been known to snatch little babies from their mothers' and eat them with mustard. Tom didn't know what to make of this bit of information, so he said, "That's a lot." On Tuesday evening, September 7, after half an hour in the lotus position, thinking about nothing whatsoever but a white pin with two black bands at its neck and the number I painted on its head, Junior went to bed at eleven o'clock and set his alarm for three in the morning, when he intended to shoot himself. "Once out of the coma and stabilized for a few weeks, I was transferred to a hospital in Portland, where I had to undergo eleven surgeries." He woke at noon, eyes gummed shut with the effluence of sleep. He felt lousy, but he was in control of himself-and strong enough to fetch his suitcase, which he'd been unable to carry upon arrival. Tom didn't attribute supernatural powers to this killer. Enoch Cain was mortal, not all-seeing and all-knowing. Evil and stupidity often go together, however, and arrogance is the offspring of their marriage, as Tom had earlier told Celestina. An arrogant man, not half as smart as he thinks, with no sense of right and wrong, with no capacity for remorse, can sometimes be so breathtakingly reckless that, ironically, his recklessness becomes his greatest strength. Because he is capable of anything, of taking risks that mere madmen wouldn't consider, his adversaries can never predict his actions, and surprise serves him well. If he also possesses animal cunning, a kind of deep intuitional shrewdness, he can react quickly to the negative consequences of his recklessness and can indeed appear to be more than human. "I know how to build boats, how to sail boats." Junior tossed garments on the floor and across the bed to create the impression that the detective had packed with haste. After being imprudent enough to blast Victoria Bressler five times with his service revolver-perhaps in a jealous rage, or perhaps because he had gone nuts-Vanadium would have been frantic to flee justice. This was pathetic. Only thickheaded fools, unschooled and unworldly, would be shaken into confession by ham-handed tactics like these. Junior Cain definitely was not a crazed sex-killer, not driven to homicide by weird lusts beyond his control. A single night of sex and death-an indulgence never to be repeated-wouldn't require serious self-examination or a reconsideration of his self-image. Upon arriving at the creche window, he had been in a buoyant mood. As he studied the quiet scene, however, he grew uneasy. The syphilitic-monkey comparison struck

Tom Vanadium as bizarre, but it turned out to be a sober judgment based on experience. In his fifties, Sparky had worked as the chief of maintenance at a medical-research laboratory, where-among other projects-monkeys had been intentionally infected with syphilis and then observed over their life span. In the terminal stages, some of the primates engaged in such out? behavior that they had prepared Sparky for his eventual encounter with Enoch Cain..Junior had almost fumbled his fork when he recognized the tune. His heart raced. His hands were suddenly clammy..If Agnes knew that Jacob had been helping her game, she might never play cards with him again. She would not approve of what he had done. Consequently, his great skill as a card mechanic must be forever his secret..When Agnes pressed for a diagnosis, Dr. Chan quietly pleaded the need to gather more information. After Barty had seen the oncologist and had additional tests, he and his mother would return here in the afternoon to receive a diagnosis and counseling in treatment options..Each booth was at a large window, and each window provided a view of the street. Vanadium wasn't out there, watching from the sidewalk, either: no glimpse of his pan-flat face shining in the December sun..He stepped into the house, quietly closed the front door, and examined the bottle. The glass was thick, especially at the base, where a large punt--a deep indentation--encouraged sediment to gather along the rim rather than across the entire bottom of the bottle. This design feature secondarily contributed to the strength of the container. Evidently he had hit her with the bottom third of the bottle, which could most easily withstand the blow..With the uniformed troopers was a stocky, late-fortyish, brush-cut man in black slacks and a gray herringbone sports jacket. His face was almost pan flat, his first chin weak, his second chin stronger than the first, and his function unknown to Junior. He would have been the least likely man to be noticed in a ten-thousand-man convention of nonentities, if not for the port-wine birthmark that surrounded his right eye, darkening most of the bridge of his nose, brightening half his forehead, and returning around the eye to stain the upper portion of his cheek..Anyway, the thing that scared her was not the monstrous father of this child. The fearsome thing was the decision that she had made a few minutes ago, in the unused hospital room on the seventh floor..Frequently, people told Agnes that she should find an agent for Barty, as he was wonderfully photogenic; modeling and acting careers, they assured her, were his for the asking. Though her son was indeed a fine-looking lad, Agnes knew he wasn't as exceptionally handsome as many perceived him to be. Rather than his looks, what made Barty so appealing, what made him seem extraordinarily good-looking, were other qualities: an unusual gracefulness for a child, such a physical easiness in every movement and posture that it seemed as though some curious personal relationship with time had allowed him twenty years to become a three-year-old; an unfailingly affable temperament and quick smile that possessed his entire face, including his mesmerizing green blue eyes. Perhaps most affecting of all, his remarkable good health was expressed in the lustrous sheen of his thick hair, in the golden-pink glow of his summer-touched skin, in every physical aspect of him, until there were times when he seemed radiant..With only a faint twinge of sentimental longing, he drove away from the house that had been his and Naomi's love nest for fourteen blissful months..Tom Vanadium checked the small wastebasket next to the sink and discovered a wad of bloody Kleenex. The crumpled wrappers from two Band-Aids..Neddy talked when Celestina paused for breath, talked over her when she didn't pause, heard only his own mellifluous voice and was pleased to conduct both sides of the conversation, wearing her down as surely as-though far more rapidly than-the sand-filled winds of Egypt diminished the pharaohs' pyramids. He talked through the first polite "Excuse me" of the tall man who stepped into the open doorway behind him, through the second and third, and then with an abruptness that was as miraculous as any cure at the shrine of Lourdes, he fell silent when the visitor put a hand on his shoulder, eased him gently aside, and entered the apartment..Foreword.Raised by a father to whom any form of amusement was blasphemy, Agnes had never seen a magician perform until she was nineteen, when Joey Lampion, then her suitor, had taken her to a stage show. Rabbits plucked out of top hats, doves conjured from sudden plumes of smoke, assistants sawn in half and mended to walk again; every illusion that had been old even in Houdini's time was a jaw-dropping amazement to her that evening. Now she remembered a trick in which the magician had poured a pitcher of milk into a funnel fashioned from a few pages of a newspaper, causing the milk to vanish when the funnel, still dry, was unrolled to reveal ordinary newsprint. The thrill that had quivered through her that evening measured I on the Richter scale compared to the full 10-point sense of wonder quaking through her at the sight of Barty as dry as if he'd spent the afternoon perched fireside..He was Father Tom again, having recommitted to his vows three years previous. At his request, the Church had assigned him as the chaplain of Pie Lady Services..squint-eyed, sharp-faced night clerk must not have been the owner, because he wasn't the type to have dreamed up cute spellings for the sign out front. Judging by his appearance and attitude, he was a former Nazi death-camp commandant who fled Brazil one step ahead of the Israeli secret service and was now hiding out in Oregon..For more than two weeks, Agnes's heart had been a clangorous place, filled with the rattle and bang of hard emotions, but now a sort of quiet had come upon it, a peace that, if it held, might one day allow joy again.

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