

## REMINISCENCES OF AN ACCIDENTAL EMBEZZLER

This momentous day. In every ending, new beginnings. But, thank God, no ending here..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.".The pair of sliding doors at the living-room archway stood half open. Beyond, voices drew Paul against his will..For Agnes and Barty, one stop remained, where some of the joy of Christmas would always be buried with the husband that she still missed every day and the father that he would never know..Paul pulled her back. He gently but firmly thrust her through the open door of the guest room in which he'd spent the night. "Stay here, wait.".Later, at home in bed, after Nolly proved the value of oysters, he and Kathleen lay holding hands. Following a companionable silence, he said, "It's a mystery.". "I'd give anything if it hadn't happened," he said earnestly. And now a tortured note wrung wet emotion from his voice "I only wish it had been me who died.".Jacob feared what men could do with clubs, knives, guns, bombs, with their bare hands, but he was most preoccupied by the unintended death that humanity brought upon itself with its devices, machines, and structures meant to improve the quality of life..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..On Friday evening, he had arranged for the drawing of the aces, but he had not stacked the subsequent twelve cards to provide for the selection of four identical knaves at three-card intervals. He'd sat in stunned..His first year in San Francisco was an eventful one for the nation and the world. Winston Churchill, arguably the greatest man of the century thus far, died. The United States launched the first air strikes against North Vietnam, and Lyndon Johnson raised troop levels to 150,000 in that conflict. A Soviet cosmonaut was the first to take a space walk outside an orbiting craft. Race riots raged in Watts for five fiery days. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law. Sandy Koufax, a Los Angeles Dodger, pitched a perfect game, in which no hitter reached first base. T. S. Eliot died, and Junior purchased one of the poet's works through the Book-of-the-Month Club. Other famous people passed away: Stan Laurel, Nat King Cole, Le Corbusier, Albert Schweitzer, Somerset Maugham.... Indira Gandhi became the first woman prime minister of India, and the Beatles' inexplicable and annoying success rolled on and on..She had put aside a half-finished pencil portrait of Phimie to develop several of Nella Lombardi..Reflections of those tracks appeared as stigmatic tears on the long face of the physician.. "Not so unbelievable," said Jacob. "Forty-five thousand people every year die in automobiles. Cars aren't transportation. They're death machines. Tens of thousands are disfigured, maimed for life.".Worse, the people who adopted Seraphim's baby might be anywhere in the nine-county Bay Area. Millions of phone listings to scan..Paul in the guest room again. Sweeping a bedside lamp to the floor, lifting the nightstand..Shuddering, rubbing furiously at himself, he stumbled into the bathroom. In the mirror, he confronted a face he hardly recognized: swollen, lumpy peppered with red hives..Allowing one month for the job might be optimistic. On the other hand, he'd had a long time to perfect a strategy.. "Our little girl's going to walk backward her whole life if you drive in reverse all the way to the hospital.".Obadiah tossed the pack of cards to Edom, startling him. "Son, you'll have to help me. My fingers have no finesse anymore.".At the midpoint of the table, directly under the chandelier, the flashing silvery disc turned through the air, turned, turned, turned out of this world into another.. "It was... the only dream that mattered," Joey said. "You ... loving me. It was a good life because of you.".just as the smile curved to completion, however, an awful thing happened. The humiliation began with a loud gurgle in his gut..During the past three years, he'd suffered much because of these sisters, including most recently the humiliation in the Dumpster with the dead musician, Celestina's pencil-necked friend with a propensity for postmortem licking. The memory of that horror flared so vividly-every grotesque detail condensed into one intense and devastating flash of recollection-that Junior's bladder suddenly felt swollen and full, although he had taken a long satisfying leak in an alleyway across the street from the restaurant at which the postcard-painting poseur had enjoyed a leisurely dinner with Ichabod..Bearing roses upon their arrival, they hadn't bothered with umbrellas. Besides, although the sky glowered, the forecast had predicted no precipitation..So much argued against the idea that they could succeed as a couple. In this age when race supposedly didn't matter anymore, it sometimes seemed to matter more year by year. Age mattered, too, and at fifty, he was twenty-six years older than she was, old enough to be her father, as surely her father would quietly but pointedly--and repeatedly!--observe. He was highly educated, with multiple medical degrees, and she had gone to art school..She. Heretofore, Celestina hadn't given a thought to the gender of the baby, because, to her, it had been less a person than a thing.. "Only for a little while. Then he is joining me at the gallery, and after the show's over, we're having dinner together.". "That would be John George Haigh," Agnes said, checking Barty's diaper before nestling him tenderly in the crook of her arm..The striking resemblance between this artist and Seraphim, as well as the facts in the biographical sketch under the photo, argued that the two were sisters.. "And after Phimie was gone ... he still hoped to learn the rapist's name, put him in prison. But then something changed his mind ... oh, maybe two years ago. Suddenly, he wanted to let it go, leave judgment to God. He said if the rapist was as twisted as Phimie claimed, then Angel and I might be in danger if we ever learned a name and went to the police. Don't stir a hornet's nest, let sleeping dogs be, and all that. I don't know what changed his mind.".Down the stairs, through the ground floor, quickly, soundlessly, breath held at times, listening for the other's breathing, listening for the softest squeak of rubber-soled shoes, although the hard clack of cloven hoofs and a whiff of sulfur would not have been surprising. At last he went to the kitchen, full circle from the shiny quarter on the breakfast table to the quarter again. No Cain..As early as this evening, here at her son's bedside, Agnes began dimly to sense that certain of

these amusing conversations with Barty might not be as fanciful as they seemed, that he was expressing in a childlike way some truth that she had assumed was fantasy..He doubted the Studebaker would ever be found, but successful men were, without exception, those who paid attention to detail..Raising one hand, wiggling the fingers, he said, "Toes, toes, toes, toes, toes." Prepared for any contingency, Junior listened to the house until he was certain that he needed the knife for no one else..Clearly, the musician recognized him, which seemed unlikely, even extraordinary, considering that they'd never spoken to each other, and considering that Junior must be only one of thousands of customers who had passed through that lounge in the past three years..Gradually, Agnes realized that this was not a prayer for the soul of a deceased infant but for the survival of one still alive..Edom carried the honey-raisin pear pie, and Agnes toted Barty across the neatly cropped yard, to the front door. The bell push triggered chimes that played the first ten notes of "That Old Black Magic," which they heard distinctly through the glass in the door..He wondered if the hawk had descended in a constricting gyre, justice coming down, but he could not lift his head to see.."Maybe because we didn't want to be called witches," said Obadiah with a smile, "and give folks one more reason to hang us."..obsessed with humanity's sorry penchant for destroying itself either by intention or ineptitude--491 suffocated and burned alive on an evening meant for champagne and revelry..Babies of unwed mothers-especially of dead unwed mothers, and especially of dead unwed mothers whose fathers were ministers unable to endure public mortification-were routinely put up for adoption. Since Seraphim had given birth here, the baby would be-no doubt already had been-adopted by a San Francisco-area family..With a portion of his profits from Tammy Bean's stock picks, Junior had bought a second painting by Sklent. Titled *In the Baby's Brain Lies the Parasite of Doom, Version 6*, it was so exquisitely repellent that the artist's genius could not be in doubt..The detective wasn't the only person in the world who liked "Someone to Watch over Me." Anyone in the lounge might have requested it. Or maybe this number was part of the pianist's usual repertoire..Shortly after nine-thirty in the morning, they landed in Eugene, and the cab driver who conveyed Junior to the town's largest shopping center spent more time staring at his afflicted passenger in the rearview mirror than he did watching the road. Junior got out of the taxi and paid through the driver's open window. The cabbie didn't even wait for his fiery-faced fare to turn completely away before he crossed himself..Relieved but still wary, he toured the small house again to be sure doors and windows were locked..Celestina's question had been about Phimie, but they had told her about the baby, and she was alarmed by their evasion..So runs the water away.."I knew," said Wally, braking for a red traffic light, "that you'd be thinking of Phimie now, and thinking of her would lead you to your father's words, because as short as her life might have been, Phimie was a Bartholomew. She left her mark."..If the angular mass was Neddy, the vaguely warm, damp something must be the strangled man's protruding tongue..This night in Weott, with the high solemn silence of the redwood forests out there now and waiting to embrace him in the morning, he slept without dreams..Koko skidded to a halt, perplexed, looked left, looked right, floppy ears lifted slightly to catch any sound of Mistress Mary..He loved Naomi, of course, and never could deny her. Although he had been especially sweet to her that night, if he had known that they would have less than a year together before fate tore her from him, he might have been even sweeter..The baby felt too light to be real. She weighed five pounds fourteen ounces, but she seemed lighter than air, as though she might float up and out of her aunt's arms.."This is Detective Bellini, with the San Francisco Police Department. Is everything all right there?"..He fiddled with the cylinder until it swung open. Five chambers, a gleaming cartridge in each..They came to her, picked up the luggage that she had put down, and Edom said, "I'll drive."..After a little silence Otter said, "Thanks." And he looked up at Hound, one brief, questioning, judging glance..around an anemone's mouth, poised to snare, lazily but relentlessly, any passing prize..In spite of her nature, Agnes could not find forgiveness in her heart this time. Words of absolution clotted in her throat. Her bitterness dismayed her, but she could not deny it..At a gun shop, Junior purchased two hundred rounds of ammunition. Later, that many cartridges seemed excessive to him. Later still, he purchased another two hundred..Angel didn't join the grieving women, but sat on the floor in front of the television, switching back and forth between Gunsmoke and The Monkees. Too young to be genuinely involved in either show, nevertheless she occasionally made gunfire sounds when Marshal Dillon went into battle or invented her own lyrics to sing along with the Monkees..she'd crossed herself during Edom's rant about the Tri-State Tornado of 1925. Then, she'd been warding off bad fortune; now, with a smile and a look of wonder, she was acknowledging the grace of God, which, according to the cards, had been settled generously on Bartholomew..He was still her boy. As always, her boy. Bartholomew. Barty. Her sweetie. Her kiddo..With Naomi, sex had been glorious, because they were bonded on multiple levels, all deeper than the mere physical. They had been so close, so emotionally and intellectually entwined, that in making love to her, he'd been making love to himself; and he would never experience a greater intimacy than that..Tuesday, January 9, having cashed out a number of investments during the past ten days, Junior made a wire transfer of one and a half million dollars to the Gammoner account in the Grand Cayman bank..When Celestina first entered his ICU cubicle, the sight of his face scared her in spite of the surgeon's assurances. Gray, he was, and sunken-cheeked-as though this were the eighteenth century and so many medicinal leeches had been applied to him that too much of his essential substance had been sucked out.."Wrong about what, sugarpie smooosh--smooosh?" Celestina asked as Wally pulled to the curb again and parked..For Junior, 1968-the Chinese Year of the Monkey--would be the Year of the Plastic Surgeon. He would require extensive dermabrasion to restore the smoothness and tone to his skin, to be as irresistibly kissable as he had been before. While at it, he would need surgery to make subtle changes in his features. Tricky. He didn't want to trade perfection for anonymity. He must take care to ensure that his postsurgery look, when he let his hair grow in and perhaps dyed it, would be as devastating to women as his previous appearance..daughter's existence. Angel, if that's what she were eventually to be named, lived under a threat as surely as had all the children of Bethlehem, who'd been

slain according to the decree of King Herod. The baby curled one small hand around her aunt's index finger. So tiny, fragile, she nonetheless gripped with surprising tenacity.. "You should call San Francisco police, have them put your place under surveillance and nail him if he turns up." Seraphim White had come to California to give birth to him in or to spare her parents--and their congregation--embarrassment.. 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.. Seeing her, Joey leaped up front his armchair again. He managed to hold on to his book this time, but he stumbled into the footstool and nearly lost his balance.. And in time, the surgeon did appear, bearing the good news that neither of the malignancies had spread to the orbit and optic nerve, but he had no greater miracle to report.. For a spirit, the maniac lawman appeared disturbingly solid. He wore a tweed sports jacket and slacks that, as far as Junior could tell, were the same clothes he'd worn on the night he died. Apparently, even the ghosts of Sklent's atheistic spiritual world were stuck for eternity in the clothes in which they had perished.. "I'm going to recommend that you be admitted overnight and that we lance these under hospital conditions. We'll use a sterile needle on some of them, but a number are so large they're going to require a surgical knife and possibly the removal of the carbuncle core. This is usually done with a local anesthetic, but in this instance, while I don't think general anesthesia will be required, we'll probably want to sedate you that is, put you in a twilight sleep." This was a California live oak, green even in winter, although its leaves were fewer now than they would be in warmer seasons. The elaborate branch structure, reflected around him, was an exquisite and harmonious maze overlaying a mosaic of sunlight green on grass, and something in its patterns suddenly touched him, moved him, seized his imagination. He felt as if he were balanced on the brink of an astonishing insight.. A moment later, in the corridor, as Nolly locked the door to his suite, Kathleen linked her right arm through Vanadium's left. "Do I call you Detective Vanadium, Brother, or Father?" "If you don't, your feeling gland isn't working. Want me to read you to sleep?" Abruptly, Junior Cain turned away from the tower, from the body of his lost love, dropped to his knees, and vomited. Vomited more explosively than he had ever done in the depths of the worst sickness of his life. Bitter, thick, grossly out of proportion to the simple lunch that he had eaten, up came a dreadfully reeking vomitus. He was untroubled by nausea, but his abdominal muscles contracted painfully, so tightly that he thought he would be cinched in two, and up came more, and still more, spasm after spasm, until he spewed a thin gruel green with bile, which surely had to be the last of it, but was not, for here was more bile, so acidic that his gums burned from contact with it--Oh God, please no--still more. His entire body heaving. Choking as he aspirated a piece of something vile. He squeezed his watering eyes shut against the sight of the flood, but he could not block out the stench.. For the past two days, Junior had eaten only binding foods, and late this afternoon, he had taken a preventive dose of paregoric, as well.. Initially, the Pacific could not be seen beyond an opaque lens of fog, Yet later, when the mist retreated, the sea itself became a portent of sightlessness: Spread flat and colorless in the morning light, the glassy water reminded her of the depthless eyes of the blind, of that terrible sad vacancy where vision is denied.. In abject misery, Junior lay waiting to go under the knife, more eager to be cut than he would have thought possible only a few hours before. The mere promise of this surgery thrilled him more than all the sex that he'd ever enjoyed between the age of thirteen and the Thursday just past.. The mound of earth beside the grave had been disguised by piles of flowers and cut ferns. The suspended casket was skirted with black material to conceal the yawning grave beneath it.. She asked him how many fingers she was holding up, and he said four, and four it was. Then two fingers. Then seven. Her hands so pale, the palms both bruised.. Junior hurried out of the kitchen and along the hallway to the front door. He ran silently, landing on his toes like a dancer. His natural athletic grace was one of the things that drew so many women to him.. In the six weeks since conception, she must have missed at least one menstrual period. She hadn't complained of morning sickness, but surely she'd experienced it. It was highly unlikely that she'd been unaware of her condition.. Scamp spent Wednesday ravishing him. It wasn't love, but there was comfort in being familiar with his partner's equipment.. He stopped for lunch at a restaurant with a spectacular view of the Pacific, framed by massive pines.. "Oh, it doesn't mean you're nervous in that sense. Nervous in this case means psychologically induced. Grief, Enoch. brief and shock and horror--they can have profound physical effects." As Junior blew his nose and blotted his eyes, Vanadium said, "I believe YOU actually loved her in some strange way." In the living room, he removed a decorative pillow from the sofa. He carried it into the foyer.. Agnes could almost visualize the three-dimensional geometric model that her little prodigy had created in his mind, which he now relied upon to reach the upper floor without a serious stumble. Pride, wonder, and sorrow pulled her heart in different directions.. 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.. Junior had left the front door locked, because if unlocked, it would look as though he had wanted to facilitate their entry, and it would make them suspicious of the whole scenario.. SHORTLY BEFORE one o'clock, the Hackachaks descended in a fury, eyes full of bloody intent, teeth bared, voices shrill.. He didn't pause to lock the house behind them. Bright Beach, in 1965, was as free of criminals as it was untroubled by lumbering brontosaurus.. "Each life," Barty Lampion said, "is like our oak tree in the backyard but lots bigger. One trunk to start with, and then all the branches, millions of branches, and every branch is the same life going in a new direction." In her arms she held Bartholomew. The infant was not heavily bundled, for the weather was unseasonably mild.. 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.. "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." When Agnes turned her head and saw Maria Elena Gonzalez, she thought she must be dreaming again.. The shakes returned, became more violent than previously--and then once more passed.. As he entered, the visitor's back was to Junior, and he moved toward the table, where dead Victoria sat with her head on her folded arms. She looked for all the world as though she were just resting.. This was tedious work and might not bear fruit. He needed to begin somewhere, however, and the telephone directory was the most logical starting point.. No one was surprised by his proposal, her acceptance, and the wedding. Barty and Angel were both eighteen when they were married in June of 1983.. He added verisimilitude to his threats by concluding with a few hard punches where they wouldn't show, in her breasts and belly, and then he, went home to Naomi, to whom he'd been married, at that time, less than five months.. Alone with Agnes, the physician said, "I want you to take Barty to a specialist in Newport Beach. Franklin Chan. He's a wonderful ophthalmologist and ophthalmological surgeon, and right now we don't have anyone like that here in town." Earthquake weather. Southern Californians had many definitions of that term, but Edom knew he was right this time. Thunder would roll again soon, but it would arise from underfoot.. He moved from a crib to a bed of his own, with guardrails, months ahead of the average toddler. Within a week, he requested that the rails be left down.. The ninth card was a jack of spades. Maria called it a knave of and at the sight of it, her bright smile dimmed.. Shaking his head, his coffee cup rattling against the saucer, Edom said, "Uh, no, sir, no, I don't think we've ever met till now." Of course, he had the Pinchbeck and Gammoner identities waiting, two escape hatches. But he didn't want to use them. He liked his life on Russian Hill, and he was loath to leave it.. Junior opened his eyes and saw that only the second of the two rounds had found its intended mark. The first had cracked through the center of a cabinet door, surely shattering dishes within.. Out of respect for his mother, Barty struggled to hold fast to his eyeless second sight, living in the idea of a world where he still had vision, until she had been accorded the honors she deserved and had been laid to rest beside his father.. If he was left standing on the porch, the visitor would circle the house, peering in windows where the drapes were not drawn, trying the doors in hope of finding one unlocked. Fearful that Victoria was sick or injured, that perhaps she had slipped on a pat of butter and cracked her head against the corner of an open oven door, he might try to force his way inside, break a window. Certainly he would go to the neighbors to call the police.. "We do look somewhat alike," Edom said, shifting his attention to Jacob's left ear.. A sudden cold breeze blew down out of the moon, bearing a faint alien scent, and the black boughs of the trees billowed and rustled like witches' skirts.. Eventually, a braless blonde in shiny white plastic boots, a white miniskirt, and a hot-pink T-shirt featuring the silk-screened face of Albert Einstein, said, "Sure, I know her. Had some classes with her. She's nice enough, but she's kind of nerdy, especially for an Afro-American. I mean, they're never nerdy--am I right?" And now she didn't need him anymore. He gazed at her face, held her cooling hand; his anchor was slipping away from him, leaving him adrift.. "In a way, he does," Vanadium said. "When you're as hollow as Enoch Cain, the emptiness aches. He's desperate to fill it, but he doesn't have the patience or the commitment to fill it with anything worthwhile. Love, charity, faith, wisdom--those virtues and others are hard won, with commitment and patience, and we acquire them one spoonful at a time. Cain wants to be filled quickly. He wants the emptiness inside poured full, in quick great gushes, and right now. ". Upon arriving at the creche window, he had been in a buoyant mood. As he studied the quiet scene, however, he grew uneasy.. Gazing into the mirror, which ought to have been clouded with self-pity as though with steam, Junior Cain searched for his anger and found it. This was a black and bitter anger, as poisonous as rattlesnake venom; with little difficulty, his heart was distilling it into purest rage.. Junior realized he was on the verge of babbling, and with an effort, he silenced himself.. "--and we're from different worlds, which I respect. I respect you and your wonderful family ... your centeredness, your certainty. I want to do this only because it's what I owe you."

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