

## STORIES AND BALLADS OF THE FAR PAST

"He knew how you felt about having too much life insurance. So he didn't disclose it to you." Agnes had read the last half of Red Planet to Barty just the previous night, but he brought the book with him, to read it again. Five days later, on Barty's birthday morning, when Agnes and Edom were in the kitchen, making preparations for the visits that had earned her the affectionate title of Pie Lady, Barty was in his highchair, eating a vanilla wafer lightly dampened with milk. Each time a crumb fell from the cookie, the boy plucked it off the tray and neatly conveyed it to his tongue. On he went, up he went, trunk to limb, limb to branch, branch to limb, to limb, to trunk. Hand over hand up the vertical parts, gripping with his knees, then standing and walking like a tightrope artist along limbs horizontal to the ground, swinging over empty air and stepping from one woody walkway to another, ever upward toward the highest bower, dwindling as though he were growing younger during the ascent, becoming a smaller and smaller boy. Forty feet, fifty feet, already far higher than the house, striving toward the green citadel at the summit. 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. In bed, lights out, Junior marveled at his daredevil spirit. He never stopped surprising himself. 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. "Six hundred ninety-five people were killed in three states. Winds so powerful that some of the bodies were thrown a mile and a half from where they were snatched off the ground." Running footsteps, heading toward the ambulance. Apparently Kenny. The second paramedic. Having been an object of Thomas Vanadium's fixation, Junior felt fortunate to have survived. He shuddered. Although weak, he was no longer in danger of spewing bile and blood like a harpooned whale. The siege had passed. Hers were the most feminine hands he'd ever seen. Slender, soft, prettier than Naomi's. He had no idea what she was talking about. Yet had the obstacles been piled twice as high, the time had come to put into words what they felt for each other and to decide what they intended to do about it. Celestina knew that in depth and intensity, as well as in the promise of passion, Wally's love for her equaled hers for him; out of respect for her and perhaps because the sweet man doubted his desirability, he tried to conceal the true power of his feelings and actually thought he succeeded, though in fact he was radiant with love. His once-brotherly kisses on the cheek, his touches, his admiring looks were all still chaste but ever more tender with the passage of time; and when he held her hand—as in the gallery this evening—whether as a show of support or simply to keep her safely beside him in a crosswalk on a busy street, dear Wally was overcome by a wistfulness and a longing that Celestina vividly remembered from Junior high school, when thirteen-year-old boys, their gazes filled with purest adoration, would be struck numb and mute by the conflict between yearning and inexperience. On three occasions recently, he seemed on the brink of revealing his feelings, which he would expect to surprise if not shock her, but the moment had never been quite right. If Cain had been attracted to one woman by her looks, surely he would be attracted to the other. And perhaps the sisters shared a quality other than beauty that drew Cain with even greater power. Innocence, perhaps, or goodness: both foods for a demon. Again he fired into the lock, squeezed the trigger a second time, and discovered that no rounds remained in the magazine. Extra cartridges were distributed in his pockets. Angel was lying on a towel on the convertible sofa, where Grace had just changed her diaper. Junior hadn't suffered a paranormal experience since the early-morning hours of October 18, when he'd drifted up from a vile dream of worms and beetles to hear the ghostly singer's faint a cappella serenade. Shouting at her to shut up, he had awakened neighbors surreptitiously with Junior. He was accustomed to being an object of desire. This night, however, the only lady he cared about was San Francisco herself, and he wanted to be alone with her. "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." Although Vanadium had been morally certain about the identity of his assailant, intuition without evidence was not sufficient to stir the authorities into action—not against a man on whom the state and county had settled \$4,250,000 in the matter of his wife's mortal fall. They would appear either to be incompetent in the investigation of Naomi Cain's death or to be pursuing Enoch in the new matter out of sheer vindictiveness. Without stacks of evidence, the political risks of acting on a policeman's instinct were too great. Knuckle over knuckle, snared in the web of thumb and forefinger, vanishing into the purse of the palm, secretly traversing the hand, reappearing, knuckle over knuckle, the coin glimmered as it turned. He wanted to say: The vain, power-mad politicians who milk cheers from ignorant crowds, the sports stars and preening actors who hear themselves called heroes and never object, they should all wither with shame at the mention of your name. Your vision, your struggle, the years of grueling work, your enduring faith when others doubted, the risk you took with career and reputation—it's one of the great stories of science, and I'd be honored if I could shake your hand. 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. He was in the kitchen at 11:20, spreading frosting on a large chocolate sheet cake while the reverend expertly frosted a coconut-layer job. Three times, Mary vanished, and three times she reappeared, before she led the bamboozled Koko to her mother and father. "Neat, huh?" Their apartment was in a four-story Victorian house that dripped gingerbread, in the exclusive Pacific Heights district. It had been converted to apartments with deep respect for the architecture, years before Wally bought it. Agnes knew now why this prognostication had dismayed rather charmed her: If you dared to believe in the good fortune predicted he cards, then you were obliged to believe in the bad, as well. In reaction to a terrible sense of weightlessness, Agnes's two-fisted grip on the steering wheel grew so tight her hands ached. She held on with all her strength, as if at real risk of floating out of the car and up toward the source of the raveling skeins of rain. Even someone of saintly habits and selfless behavior might be a monster in his heart, filled with unspeakable desires, which he might act upon only once or never. "I'm glad to hear it," Tom said. His thin smile might have been ironic, though it wasn't easy to interpret the meaning of any subtle expression on his hammered face. The girl was creepy, no doubt about it, and Junior felt now precisely as he had felt on the night of Celestina's exhibition at the Greenbaum Gallery, when he had come out of the alleyway after disposing of Neddy Gnathic in the Dumpster and had checked his watch only to discover his bare wrist. He was missing something here, too, but it wasn't merely a Rolex, wasn't a thing at all, but an insight, a profound truth. Turning around in his seat, watching with amusement as Celestina fumbled nervously with the currency, the cabbie said, "You're not scared, not you. Sitting back there so silent most all the way, you weren't thinking about being famous. You were thinking about that girl of yours." "Thirsty," Agnes rasped. Her voice was Sahara sand abrading anient stone, the dry whisper of a pharaoh's mummy talking to itself in a vaulted sealed for three thousand years. He prepared his knives and guns. Blades and bullets. Fortune favors the bold, the self-improved, the self-evolved, the focused. The infant Bartholomew was here in San Francisco. He must be found. He must be dispatched. By the time Junior devised a plan of action to locate the child, he was so hot with anger that he was sweating, and he stripped off one of his two pairs of briefs. "Do you know him?" Edom asked, gazing longingly now at the open door, from which Jacob had turned away. "Obadiah Sepharad?" Upon arriving at the creche window, he had been in a buoyant mood. As he studied the quiet scene, however, he grew uneasy. WHILE THE SLATS of ash-gray light slowly lost their meager luster, and sable shadows metastasized in sinister profusion, the sentinel silence remained unbroken between Junior Cain and the birthmarked man. He had never associated Enoch Cain's dreaded Bartholomew with the disciple Bartholomew in Harrison White's sermon, which had been broadcast once in December '64, the month prior to Naomi's murder and again in January '65. Even now, with blood-scrawled-and-stabbed Bartholomew on the wall and with This Momentous Day before him in the brochure, Tom Vanadium couldn't quite make the connection. He strove to pull together the broken lengths in this chain of evidence, but they remained separated by one missing link. "Thanks, Sparky, but not tonight. I'm thinking of taking a look around downstairs if old Nine Toes isn't stuck at home tonight with a case of paralytic bladder." When he heard the snick of the lock being disengaged, he rammed into the men's room. "Paul," she said, "you've got a lovely house, but Celestina and Grace are doers. They need to keep occupied. They'll go stir-crazy if they don't stay busy. Am I right, ladies?" Now, after removing the four decks of cards from the pressboard packs in which they had come, Jacob lined them up side by side on the scarred maple top of the table. 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. Frequently, these days, she found herself explaining aspects of life to Barty that she hadn't expected to discuss for years to come. She wondered how she could make him understand this: Life can be so sweet, so full, that sometimes happiness is nearly as intense as anguish, and the pressure of it in the heart swells close to pain. Edom would have judged this a perfect day-except for the earthquake weather. He was convinced that the Big One would bring the coastal cities to ruin before twilight. make a worrywart life-insurance salesman like me seem just as light hearted as a schoolgirl. Part of him knew this sound was his heartbeat, not the footfalls of an otherworldly pursuer, but that part of him wasn't dominant at the moment. He moved faster, not exactly running, but hurrying like a man late for an appointment. Junior knew that she must be teasing him. Her sense of play was delicious. Such devilry in her scintillant blue eyes, such sauciness. In truth, he was terrified. Although his need for her company was so profound that it seemed to arise from his marrow, a part of him marveled-and trembled-at his dedicated pursuit of her. Aftermath was not important. Only movement mattered. Just forget the busload of nuns smashed on the tracks, and stay with the onrushing train. Keep moving, looking forward, always forward. The old woman crumpled with a papery rustle, as though she were an elaborately folded piece of origami. She would be unconscious for a while, and after she came around, she probably wouldn't remember who she was, let alone what make of car she'd been driving, until Junior was well out of Eugene. Mrs. Cain's little boy felt small, weak, sorry for himself, and terribly alone. The detective was still here, but his presence only aggravated Junior's sense of isolation. He almost opened the paper atop the quarter before seeing it. Shiny. Liberty curved across the top of the coin, above the head of the patriot, and under the patriot's chin were stamped the words In God We Trust. With the determination of any pulp-magazine adventurer, Paul walked in sunshine and in rain. He walked in heat and cold. Wind did not deter him, nor lightning. These past ten days had been the most difficult of her life, harder even than those following Joey's death. Back then, although she had lost a husband and a gentle lover and her best friend all at once, she'd had her undiminished faith, as well as her newborn son and all the promise of his future. She still had her precious boy, even though his future was to some extent blighted, and her faith remained with her, too, though diminished and offering less solace than before. 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..He knew the titles that he wanted: "Tunnel in the Sky, Between Planets, Starman Jones. ". "Crafty men" is what they called wizards in those days..When Renee realized that this rejection was complete and final, she-he, whatever-was transformed from well-sugared southern lady to bitter, venomous reptile. Eyes glittering with fury, lips twisted and skinned back from her teeth, she called him all kinds of bastard, stringing epithets together so effortlessly and colorfully that she enhanced his vocabulary more than had all the home-study courses that he'd ever taken, combined. "And face it, pretty-boy, you knew what I was from the moment you offered to buy me a drink. You knew, and you wanted it, wanted me, and then when we got right down to the nasty, you lost your nerve. Lost your nerve, pretty-boy, but not your need."..when red aces weft followed by disturbing jacks, Agnes had pretended to take her son's card-told fortune lightly, especially the frightful part of it. In fact, a coldness had twisted through her heart..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 assumed the dead girl had come from a family of stature in the Negro community, which would explain the stonemason's accelerated service. Vanadium, according to his own words, was a friend of the family; consequently, the father was most likely a police officer..Junior locked the door. He started the engine and drove out of the cemetery faster than was prudent on the winding service road..Only a dishonest or delusional man, however, could justify Victoria's killing as self-defense. To a degree, he'd been motivated by anger and passion, and Junior was forthright enough to admit this..Barty's reading and writing skills appeared to be related to his talent for math, as well. To him, language was first phonics, a sort of music that symbolized objects and ideas, and this music was then translated into written "syllables using the alphabet-which he saw as a system of math employing twenty-six digits instead of ten..Instead, he sat in the breakfast nook with his phone books and resumed the grueling search for Bartholomew..there in more genteel and gilded ages, and her flights of imagination sometimes acquired such vivid detail that they were eerily like memories.."We do look somewhat alike," Edom said, shifting his attention to Jacob's left ear..He liked her face, too. She wore no makeup, and pulled her brown hair back in a bun. Some might say she was mousy, but the only things mousy that Nolly saw about her were a piquant tilt to her nose and a certain cuteness..He was a virile young man, desired by many, and life was short. Poor Naomi, her lovely face and her look of shock still fresh in his memory, was a constant reminder of how suddenly the end could come. No one was guaranteed tomorrow. Seize the day.."God bless us, every one," Agnes repeated with all her extended family, and after a sip of the wine, she made an excuse to check on something in the kitchen, where she pressed hot tears into a cool, slightly damp dishtowel to prevent the telltale swelling of her eyes..Agnes remained mystified by this talk, but a week before, in the rain-swept cemetery, she had learned there was substance to it..Reverend White's murder received significant coverage throughout the nation, especially in West Coast papers, because of its perceived racial motivation and because it involved the burning of a parsonage.."Well, sure," said Mary, "without dying first. That would be the easy way to get there. I'm a Champion, aren't I? Do we take the easy way, if we can avoid it? Did Daddy take the easiest way up the oak tree?".The dining table could accommodate six, and Agnes instructed Maria to set two places on each of the long sides, leaving the ends unused. "It'll be cozier if we all sit across from one another."..THOUGH OTHERS MIGHT see magic in the world, Edom was enthralled only by mechanism: the great destructive machine of nature grinding everything to dust. Yet wonder suddenly bloomed in him at the sight of the ace bearing his nephew's name..Neither of them was aware that their personal drama, in all its clumsiness and glory, had focused the attention of everyone in the restaurant. The cheer that went up at Celestina's acceptance of his proposal caused her to start, knocking the ring from Wally's hand as he attempted to slip it on her finger. The ring bounced across the table, they both grabbed for it, Wally made the catch, and this time she was properly betrothed, to wild applause and laughter..After taking a minute to steel himself, Junior squatted next to the dead detective..In the spring and summer of '66, he flew to Memphis, Tennessee, stayed a few days, and walked 288 miles to St. Louis. From St. Louis he hiked west 253 miles to Kansas City, Missouri, and then southwest to Wichita. From Wichita to Oklahoma City. From Oklahoma City east to Fort Smith, Arkansas, from whence he rode home to Bright Beach on a series of Greyhound buses..Suddenly, even in the heart of a great city, the alleyway seemed as lonely as an English moor, and not a smart place to seek asylum from a vengeful spirit. Casting aside all pretense of self-control, Junior sprinted for the next street, where the sight of multitudes, swarming in winter sunshine, filled him not with paranoia or even uneasiness, anymore, but with an unprecedented feeling of brotherhood..Even in this soft light, Nolly could see that she was blushing like a young girl. She glanced around at the nearby tables..The popeyed little toad smirked over there on the far side of his pretentious desk.."Because Cain had called him to get a recommendation of a P. I. here in San Francisco," said Kathleen. "To find out what happened to Seraphim White's baby."..Vanadium was dead. Pounded with pewter and sunk in a flooded quarry. Gone forever..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..In the end, the reason for the walking was the walking itself. Walking gave him something to do, a needed purpose. Motion equaled meaning. Movement became a medicine for melancholy, a preventive for madness..With the stocky detective looming, Junior wasn't able to stroke his imagination into an erotic mood. In his mind's eye, Victoria's ample bosom remained concealed behind a starched white uniform..The birthmarked man identified himself as Detective Thomas Vanadium. He did not use the familiar, diminutive form of his name, as had the doctor, and his voice was as uninflected as his face was flat and homely..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..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..Softened by a Shantung shade, the lamplight was golden on his small smooth face, but sapphire and emerald in his eyes..As the storm failed to dampen Joey, so the rotating red-and-white beacons on the surrounding police vehicles did not touch him. The.He half expected to hear Thomas Vanadium in the distance, softly singing "Someone to Watch over Me.".To celebrate, Junior went to a gallery and purchased the second piece of art in his collection. Not sculpture this time: a painting..And although Simon would have denied it, would even have joked that a conscience was a liability for an attorney, he possessed a moral compass. When he traveled too far along the wrong trail, that magnetized needle in his soul led him back from the land of the lost..Once more crowding his quarry, Junior said, "I'm amazed you'd recognize me, since I haven't been to the lounge often."."That discord sets up lots of other vibrations, some of which will return to you in ways you might expect-and some in ways you could never see coming. Of the things you couldn't have seen coming, I'm the worst.".Fortunately, the chill fog didn't bum away from the Mercedes, considering that it facilitated the stalking of Celestina. The mist swaddled the white Buick in which she rode, increasing the chances that Junior might lose track of her, but it also cloaked the Mercedes and all but ensured that she and her friend wouldn't realize that the pair of headlights behind them were always those of the same vehicle..After the detective returned the box to the nightstand, the coin began to turn again..On the sofa, Celestina finally worked up the courage to dial her parents' number in Spruce Hills..Think, think. A three-minute drive to the Lampion place. Maybe two minutes, running stop signs, cutting comers..As Sinatra began to sing "I'll Be Seeing You," Junior stepped around the bloom and the Merlot. He cautiously peeled back two inches of the curtain at one of the sidelights.. "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.".people that he was innocent and, in fact, constitutionally incapable of premeditated murder.

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