

## THE WOLF OF GUBBIO A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

"I was raised to understand it," said Celestina, and when she looked across the room, she saw that her words had moved her mother. "A nose, now, is a useful thing, a salable thing," Hound went on. "Not that I'm looking for competition. But a finder can always find work, as they say... You ever been in a mine?" "Great guy. Do you have an address for her, a way maybe I could get in touch about her brother?" Junior had thought most other policemen must consider Vanadium to be a loose cannon, a rogue, an outcast. Perhaps the opposite was true—and if it was, if Vanadium was highly regarded among his peers, he was immeasurably more dangerous than Junior had realized. In adversity lies great opportunity, as Caesar Zedd teaches, and always, of course, there is a bright side even when you aren't able immediately to see it. The hospital was eerily quiet, except for the occasional squeak of rubber-soled shoes on the vinyl floor of the corridor. After a while, when no plane crashed on top of him, Jacob got up, went into the kitchen, and mixed a batch of dough for Agnes's favorite treats. Chocolate-chip cookies with coconut and pecans. 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." They wanted to go up to Barty's room, but she refused them, because there was nothing more they could do for the boy than they had done for her. "He wants to finish reading Starman Jones, and I'm not letting anything interfere with that. We're leaving for Newport Beach at seven in the morning, and you can see him then." As Barty ascended higher, Agnes's fear became purer, but at the same time, she was filled with a wonderful, irrational exhilaration. That this could be accomplished, that the darkness could be overcome, struck music from the harpstrings of the soul. From time to time, the boy paused, perhaps to rest or to mull over the three-dimensional map in his incredible mind, and every time that he started upward again, he put his hands in exactly the right place, whereupon Agnes would speak a silent inner yes! Her heart was with Barty high in the tree, her heart in his, as he had been with her, safe inside her womb, on the rainy twilight that she had ridden the spinning, tumbling car to widowhood. Bellini assured Celestina that they didn't expect Enoch Cain to be so brazen as to follow police vehicles and to renew his assault on her at St. Mary's. Nevertheless, he assigned a uniformed police officer to the hall outside of the waiting room that served friends and family of the patients in the intensive-care unit. And judging by that guard's high level of vigilance, Bellini had not entirely ruled out the possibility that Cain might show up here to finish what he started in Pacific Heights... quiet pool, sweet with the fragrance of jasmine. Under the huge spreading oak. Grass oiled to a glossy green by the. 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. Calling after her, Agnes said, "No, wait, sugarpie. He should be coming down right now, before it gets dark." In the first drawer, he discovered an address book. Logically, Vanadium would have taken this with him, even if on the lam from a murder rap, so Junior tucked it in his jacket pocket. "You can't take much of anything by mouth for a few hours yet," said the nurse. "Nausea is too great a risk. Retching might start you hemorrhaging again." As he'd been instructed, Vanadium felt along the return edge of the carved limestone casing to the right of the window until he located a quarter-inch-diameter steel pin that protruded an inch. The pin was grooved to facilitate a grip. An insistent, steady pull was required, but as promised, the thumb-turn latch on the inside disengaged. 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. "I was never Cary Grant, to begin with," said Vanadium, still ceaselessly rolling the quarter across his fingers, "so I had no big emotional investment in my appearance. Cosmetic surgery would have added another year of recuperation time, probably much longer, and I was anxious to get after Cain. Seemed to me this mug of mine might be just the thing to scare him into an incriminating mistake, even a confession." A cold wetness just above the crook of his left elbow. A sting. A tourniquet of flexible rubber tubing had been tied around his left arm, to make a vein swell more visibly, and the sting had been the prick of a hypodermic needle. For all his brilliance, however, he was still a boy who loved to run and jump and tumble. Who swung from the backyard oak tree in a rope-and-tire swing. Who was thrilled when given a tricycle. Who giggled in delight while watching his uncle Jacob roll a shiny quarter end over-end across his knuckles and perform other simple coin tricks. The problem was Celestina in the Buick, because when she saw what was happening, she might slide behind the steering wheel and speed away. The engine was running, white plumage rising from the tailpipe and feathering away in the fog, so she might escape if she was a quick thinker. No more than a minute after Vanadium departed, a nurse arrived in a rush, no doubt sent by the hateful cop. Hard to tell, through all the tears, if she was a looker. A nice face, perhaps. But such a stick-thin body. "Only for a little while. Then he is joining me at the gallery, and after the show's over, we're having dinner together." If not for Celestina's slutty little sister, Bartholomew would not exist. No threat. Junior's life would be different, better. Harrison and Grace had welcomed him in spite of the fact that a friend and parishioner had died on Thursday, leaving them both bereft and with church

obligations..Two high-quality deadbolt locks. Sufficient protection against the average intruder, but inadequate to keep out a self-improved man with channeled anger..Most likely, if Victoria was entertaining, the visitor's car would have been parked in the driveway..must either change her mind or commit herself to a more difficult and challenging life than any she had envisioned only this morning..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..He was having difficulty focusing his attention on the problem at hand. Through his mind, odd and disconnected thoughts rolled like slow, greasy, eye-of-the-hurricane waves on an ominous sea..Only now, as the tide of adrenaline began to ebb, Paul wondered who could possibly have wanted to kill a man of peace and God, a man as good as Harrison White..Nothing in life was risk free, so he hesitated only a moment: at the foot of the porch steps before climbing them and knocking on the door..White as a Viking winter, these magnificent choppers, and as straight as the kernel rows in the corn on Odin's high table. Superb occlusal surfaces. Exquisite incisor ledges. Bicuspid of textbook formation nestled in perfect alignment between molars and canines.. "Does my dad like Christmas?" Barty asked, sitting on the grave grass in front of the headstone.. "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." Paul said, "I wanted you ... I don't know ... I just wanted you to see her. I wanted to say ... to say. . ." One manly woman. Several womanly men. But no blocky figure that could have been the crazed cop even in disguise..Waste of time to check those places. More likely, woman and boy were hiding in the last room..Thanks to his intelligence and his personality, Barty's presence was so great for his age that Agnes tended to think of him as being physically larger and stronger than he actually was. As the scent of grass grew more complex and even more appealing, she saw her son more clearly than she'd seen him in a while: quite small, fatherless yet brave, burdened with a gift that was a blessing but that also made a normal boyhood impossible, forced to grow up at a up faster pace than any child should be required to endure. Barty was achingly delicate, so vulnerable that when Agnes looked at him, she felt a little of the awful sense of helplessness that burdened Edom and Jacob..The pendulous bellies of the rain-swollen clouds were no darker than when he had first come to the cemetery, yet they appeared more ominous now than earlier.. "I thought there was a burglar," Junior groaned, but he knew better than to spit out his entire story at once, for then he would appear to be reciting a script..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.. "And, listen, if you leave too soon behind me, I've got a guy watching, and he'll put a hollow-point thirty-eight in your ass." "There's nothing here for you," she said, stepping back from the door in order to close it..He needed to keep moving, conduct the search, find the watch, and get the hell out of here, but he couldn't stop staring at the musician. Something about the cadaver made him nervous-aside from the fact that it was dead and disgusting and, if he was caught with it, a one-way ticket to the gas chamber..He considered himself to be a thoroughly useless man, taking up space in a world to which he contributed nothing, but he did have a talent for baking. He could take any recipe, even one from a world-class pastry chef, and improve upon it..The night was hushed but for the barking of a dog in the great distance. Hollow, far softer than the ghostly singing that had recently haunted Junior, the rough voice of this hound nevertheless stirred him, spoke to an essential aspect of his heart.. "You did just fine, Tom, just fine," Agnes said in a consoling tone that she might have used with a boy whose performance, at a piano recital, had been earnest but undistinguished. "We were all quite impressed."..spades. Friday night, she had ripped the cards in thirds and had been carrying the twelve pieces with her since then, waiting for this quiet Sunday evening..sport shirt just for no reason at all, because she thought he'd look nice in it?..What the commodifiers of fantasy count on and exploit is the insuperable imagination of the reader, child or adult, which gives even these dead things life-of a sort, for a while..After a while, Franklin Chan asked, "Do you want me with you when you tell him?"..Yes, he suspected that he would require a great deal of rest to prepare himself for this vixen. Even in her loose white uniform and stodgy rubber-soled shoes, she was an incomparably erotic figure. She would be a lioness in bed..No sign of Vanadium. Some of the taller monuments offered hiding places on both sides of the cemetery road, as did the thicker trunks of the larger trees..She said, "Honey, what I'm wondering is ... could you walk where you don't have bad eyes, like you walked where the rain wasn't ... and leave the tumors in that other place? Could you walk where you have good eyes and come back with them?"..Yet he brooded even at breakfast, in spite of the consolation of clotted cream and berries, raisin scones and cinnamon butter. In better worlds, wiser Tom Vanadiums chose different tactics that resulted in less misery than this, in a far swifter conveyance of Enoch Cain to the halls of justice. But he was none of those Tom Vanadiums. He was only this Tom, flawed "land struggling, and he couldn't take comfort in the fact that elsewhere he had proved to be a better man..Jacob cooked corn bread, cheese-and-parsley omelettes, and crisp home fries with a dash of onion salt..And when she finally looked directly at him, blinked at him, her lashes flicking off a spray of fine droplets, Agnes saw that Barty was dry. Not a single jewel of rain glimmered in his thick dark hair or on the baby-smooth planes of his face. His shirt and sweater were as dry as if they had just been taken off a hanger and from a dresser drawer. A few drops darkened the legs of the boy's khaki pants--but Agnes realized this was water that had dripped from her arm as she'd reached across him to adjust the vent..He got everything he ordered--full value, and more. When he lifted off the top of the bun to squeeze mustard onto the burger, he discovered a shiny quarter pressed into the half-melted cheese..Having booked the suite for three nights, Tom expected that he would spend far fewer late hours in his bed than sitting watch in the shared living room..Of course, Angel might have been playing around with the talking book. Or, even though she'd left the dolls downstairs, she might have been filling the time until Barty's return by having a nice chat with Miss Pixie and Miss Velveeta. She had other voices, too, for other dolls, and one for a sock puppet named

Smelly..With the successful consumption of the burger and with the addition of the third Sklent to his collection, Junior felt more upbeat than he'd been in quite a while. Contributing to his better mood was the fact that he hadn't heard the phantom singer in longer than three months, since the library in July..During the following day, January 6, as Phimie was wheeled around the hospital for tests in various departments, Celestina remained in 724, working on her portfolio for a class in advanced portraiture. She was a Junior at the Academy of Art College..Thanksgiving dinner was a fine affair, and Christmas was even better. On New Year's Eve, Wally downed one drink too many and more than once offered to perform surgery on any member of the family, free of charge "right here, right now," as long as the procedure was within his area of expertise..And the mills of capitalism provide them. Supply meets demand. Fantasy becomes a commodity, an industry.."Because He didn't want you to be a dog." She finished tying a bow in the drawstrings. "There. You look just like an M&M." 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..Twenty minutes later, at home, he poured sherry over ice. Sipping, he stood in the living room, admiring his two paintings..When he woke, he was in a hospital bed, his upper body slightly elevated. The only illumination was provided by a single window: an ashen light too dreary to be called a glow, trimmed into drab ribbons by the.."Do you want me to call and confirm how Vanadium was harassing you up here?" asked Magusson.."I mean," said Dr. Lipscomb, "that I'm selling my practice and putting an end to my medical career. I wanted you to know."..She worried that they would argue with her, and though she knew that she was committed to her decision, she was afraid to have that commitment tested just yet..The minister had finished. The service was over. No one came to Junior with condolences, because they would see him again shortly, at the Ford dealership buffet..In the front wall of the living room, where once had been a fine bay window, the parsonage lay open to the sunny day. Tom shrubbery, carried in from outside, marked the path of destruction. In the very middle of the room, plowed against a toppled sofa and a thick drift of broken furniture, a battered red Pontiac sagged to the left on broken springs and blown tires. A portion of the crazed windshield quivered and collapsed inward, while plumes of steam hissed from under the buckled hood..They knew no one named Bartholomew, and she had never heard the name from him before, but she knew what he wanted. He was speaking of the son he would never see..Junior reached the window seat and stared down at her. "I don't believe that's true."..Their struggle to put their sorrow into words moved Agnes not because they cared so deeply, but because in the end they were unable to express themselves adequately. Without the relief provided by expression, their anguish grew corrosive. Their lifelong introversion left them without the social skills to unburden themselves or to provide solace to others. Worse, their obsessions with death, in all its many means and mechanisms, had prepared them to expect Barty's cancer, which left them neither shocked nor capable of consolation, but merely resigned. Ultimately, in great frustration, each twin was reduced to fragmented sentences, crippled gestures, quiet tears-and Agnes became the only consoler..Rowena loves you, Phimie had told him, briefly repressing the effects of her stroke to speak with clarity. Beezil and Feezil are safe with her Messages from his lost wife and children, where they waited for him beyond this life..Whether the cop was unhinged or not, Junior had nothing to gain by talking to him, especially in this disorienting darkness. He was exhausted, achy, with a sore throat, and he couldn't trust himself to be as..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..altogether by taking slow deep breaths, slow deep breaths, and by remembering that each of us has a right to be happy, to be fulfilled, to be free of fear..Angel, as if in God's own hands, stared with round-eyed wonder at the physician..The morning that it happened, Tom Vanadium rose later than usual, shaved, showered, and then used the telephone in Paul's downstairs study to call Max Bellini in San Francisco and to speak, as well, with authorities in both the Oregon State Police and the Spruce Hills Police Department..Instead, as he settled into the offered chair, he withdrew a picture of Perri from his wallet. It was an old black-and-white school photograph, slightly yellow with age, taken in 1933, the year he'd begun to fall in love with her, when they were both thirteen..Junior suspected that no one other than this man's mother called him Tom. He was probably "Detective" to some and "Vanadium" to most who knew him..Using the straight edge of a ruler to guide his eye down each column, Junior searched for Bartholomew, ignoring surnames. He had already checked to see if anyone in the county had Bartholomew for a last name; no one in this directory did..More walls than not, in both rooms, were lined with bookshelves and file cabinets. Here he kept numerous case studies of accidents, man-made disasters, serial killers, spree killers: proof undeniable that humanity was a fallen species engaged in both the unintentional and calculated destruction of itself..Grace, proving again the aptness of her name, said the one thing most likely, in time, to bring true peace to Celestina. "Remember Bartholomew.".."Sit down, sit down," Agnes urged. "I can offer coffee now and pie in a little bit."..Yet for all his love of reading and of music, events suggested that for mathematics he had a still greater aptitude..Enigmatic as ever on this subject, he continued: "I'm probably not blind more places than I am. Yeah, sure, I'd rather be me in one of the other places where my eyes are good, but this is the me I am. And you know what?.."He didn't rely on sounds to help him find his way, though here and there one served as a marker of his progress. Twelve paces from his room, a floorboard squeaked almost inaudibly under the hallway carpet, which told him that he was seventeen paces from the head of the stairs. He didn't need that muffled creak to know exactly where he was, but it always reassured him..The wink startled and baffled Edom. Oddly, he thought of the mysterious, disembodied, and eternally unwinking eye in the floating pinnacle of the pyramid that was on the back of any one-dollar bill..which was tied a gift tag bearing a hand-printed message: With our compliments. Thanks for your business..Slow deep breaths. Per Zedd, slow deep breaths. Any state of anxiety, regardless of how powerful, could be ameliorated or even dissipated..After a surgeon had lanced

fifty-four boils and cut the cores from the thirty-one most intractable (shaving the patient's head to get at the twelve that were festering on his scalp), and after three days of hospitalization to guard against staphylococcus infection, and after he had been turned back into the world as bald as Daddy Warbucks and with the promise of permanent scarring, Junior visited the Reno library to catch up with current events..Junior had no idea who the driver of the Buick might be, but he hated the tall lanky son of a bitch because he figured the guy was humping Celestina, who would never have humped anyone but Junior if she had met him first, because like her sister, like all women, she would find him irresistible. He felt that he had a prior claim on her because of his relationship to the family; he was the father of her sister's bastard boy, after all, which made him their blood by shared--progeny.. "I'll never forget it," Dr. Salk promised. With his attention still on Perri's pictures, he said, "But I'm afraid you give me far too much credit. I'm no superman. I didn't do the work alone. So many dedicated people were involved."..His exceptional sensitivity remained a curse. He had been more profoundly affected by Victoria's and Vanadium's tragic deaths than he had realized. Wrenched, he was..room, heavier and colder than the ice bags that were draped across Junior's midsection.. "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.".. "That's correct," Parkhurst said. "Probably one or more small blood vessels ruptured from the extreme violence of the emesis."..Fascinated by this strange new realm, Angel returned to her chair periodically, between explorations, to sip apple juice and to reveal her latest discoveries: "They got yellow shelf paper. They got potatoes in a drawer. They got four kinds of pickles in the refrigerator. They got a toaster under a sock with pictures of birds on it."..From out of the fog and darkness came the slap of running feet on bricks. He was sprinting toward the back of the house..On other nights, she had overheard this and been touched. On this Christmas Eve, however, it filled her with wonder and wondering, for she recalled their conversation earlier, at Joey's grave..Though they had expected the cause of the explosion, both Paul and Harrison were halted by shock at the sight of all this ruination. They had expected to find the car jammed into the wall of the house, never this far inside. The speed required to penetrate this distance into the structure beggared Paul's skills of calculation and made him wonder if even recklessness and alcohol were sufficient to produce, such a catastrophe..Had Kathleen Klerkle been a man, she would have enjoyed larger quarters in a newer building in a better part of town. She was more gentle and respectful of the patient's comfort than any male dentist Nolly had ever known, but prejudice hampered women in her profession..She was a duplicitous bitch, too. After coming on to him, after teasing a reaction out of him, she had run off and gossiped about him as though he had instigated the seduction. Worse, to make herself feel important, she had told the police her skewed version, surely with much colorful embellishment..Shrieking like carrion-eating birds waiting for their wounded dinner to die, the Hackachaks twice drew stern warnings from nurses. They were told to quiet down and respect the patients in neighboring rooms.

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