

THE MIDLAND NATURALIST 1881 VOL 4

This morning, only his love for his sister, Agnes, gave him the courage to drive and to become the pie man.. "Phimie said the creep thought it was funny, but using Daddy's voice as background music also ... well, aroused him, maybe because it further humiliated her and because he knew it would humiliate our father. But we never told Daddy that part of it. Neither of us saw any useful reason for telling him." .Phimie gazed upon the child briefly, then sought her sister's eyes again. Another word..When she was finished with the dishtowel, she returned to the dining room, and though dinner was underway, she called for another toast. Raising her glass, she said, "To Maria, who is more than my friend. My sister. I can't let you talk about what I've given you without telling your girls that you've given back more. You taught me that the world is as simple as sewing, that what seem to be the most terrible problems can be stitched up, repaired." She raised her glass slightly higher. "First chicken to be come with first egg inside already. God bless." .Five days ago, reasoning that an unscrupulous attorney would know how to find an equally unscrupulous private detective, even across state borders, Junior had phoned Simon Magusson, in Spruce Hills, for a confidential recommendation. Apparently, there also existed a brotherhood of the terminally ugly, the members of which sent business to one another. Magusson-he of the large head, small ears, and protuberant eyes-had referred Junior to Nolly Wulfstan..If the sight of his daughter almost drove him to his knees, the sight of his wife, also his first in seven years, lifted him until he was virtually floating across the grass..Although Junior continued to feel threatened, continued to trust his instinct in this matter, he didn't devote his every waking hour to the hunt. He had a life to enjoy, after all. Self-improvements to undertake, galleries to explore, women to pursue..For a moment," Lipscomb continued, "her voice became clear, no longer slurred. She raised her head from the pillow, and her eyes fixed on me, all the confusion gone. She was so ... intense. She said ... she said, 'Rowena loves you.' .Although the piano was at some distance and the restaurant was a little noisy, Kathleen recognized the tune at once. She looked up from her veal, her eyes full of merriment..The kids insisted on knowing what was meant by the line about the chicken, and this led to the laying of a coopful of Why-did-the chicken-cross-the-road jokes, which Edom and Jacob had memorized in childhood as an act of rebellion against their humorless father..A pang of regret pierced her, that her boy's precocity should deny him this fine fantasy, as her morose father had denied it to her. "He's real," she asserted..To the foot of the bed slouched the third and final Hackachak: twenty-four-year-old Kaitlin, Naomi's big sister. Kaitlin was the unfortunate sister, having inherited her looks from her father and her personality equally from both parents. A peculiar coppery cast enlivened her brown eyes, and in a certain slant of light, her angry glare could flash as red as blood..He stepped to the front door, which was framed by curtained side lights. He drew one of the curtains aside and peered out.. "But nothing equals a quake for killing. Big one in Shaanxi, China, killed eight hundred thirty thousand." .Although the Rolex was expensive, Junior cared nothing about the monetary loss. He could afford to buy an armful of Rolexes, and wear them from wrist to shoulder..Their station wagon stood along the service road, at least a hundred yards from the grave. With no wind to harry it, the rain fell as plumb straight as the strands of beaded curtains, and beyond these pearly veils, the car appeared to be a shimmering dark mirage.. "Take care you don't beat evil into him," said his aunt..Eventually, dinner over, cleanup finished, when Maria and the uncles had gone, Agnes and Barty faced the stairs together. She followed, holding his cane, which he said he preferred not to use in the house, prepared to catch him if he stumbled..The announcement poster seemed enormous, huge, far bigger than she remembered it, crazily-recklessly large. By its very size, it challenged critics to be cruel, dared the fates to celebrate her triumph by shaking the city to ruin right now, in the quake of the century. She wished Helen Greenbaum had opted, instead, for a few lines of type on an index card, taped to the glass..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..On the counter beside the bathroom sink stood an open box of BandAids in a variety of sizes, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, and a bottle of iodine..Spinning off the stool, he had also spun out of control. Second by second, twin storms of anger and fear whirled stronger within him..Otter was silent a while. Then he said in a low voice, "Clay, and gravel, and under that the rock that bears garnets. All under this part of the city is that rock. I don't know the names." .Of the three Bartholomews that he'd turned up recently, he chose Prosser because, burdened by the name Enoch, Junior felt sympathy for any girl whose parents had cursed her with Zelda..the hilly streets of the city, ignoring all traffic lights and stop signs, pegging the speedometer needle at its highest mark, as though he might eventually be air-cooled by sufficient speed. He wanted to slam through unwary pedestrians, crack their bones, and send them tumbling..Maria stood at the bedside, leaning with her forearms against the railing. A silver-and-onyx rosary tightly wrapped her small brown hands, although she was not counting the beads or murmuring Hail Marys. I Her prayer was for Agnes's baby..This was a test of Junior's gullibility, and he would not give Vanadium the satisfaction of searching his robe for the coin.. "But in 'This Momentous Day,' Bartholomew is just the disciple, the historical figure, and he's also a metaphor for the unforeseen consequences of even our most ordinary actions." .Celestina circled him, half carrying but also half dragging the chair, either because her nerves were still ringing and her arms were weak--or because she was faking weakness in the hope of luring him to a reckless response. Junior circled her while she rounded oil him frantically trying to deal with the pistol without taking his eyes off his adversary..PERRI'S POLIO-WHITTLED body did not test the strength of her pallbearers. The minister prayed for her soul, her friends mourned her loss, and the earth received her.. "Three hundred and ninety-six of the dead were children under the age of ten," Jacob continued. "A passenger train was tumbled off the tracks, killing twenty. Another train with tank

cars got smashed around, and oil spilled across the flood waters, ignited, and all these people clinging to floating debris were surrounded by flames, no way to escape. Their choice was being burned alive or drowning." When she didn't at once accept his generosity, he said, "All my life, I've lived just to get through the day. First survival. Then achievement, acquisition. Houses, investments, antiques ... There's nothing wrong with any of that. But it didn't fill the emptiness. Maybe one day I'll return to medicine. But that's a hectic existence, and right now I want peace, calm, time to reflect. Whatever I do from here on . . . I want my life to have a degree of purpose it's never had before. Can you understand that?" Everywhere in the fabled city, calves and knees and magnificent expanses of taut thighs were on display. This brought out the dreamy romantic in Junior, and more than ever he yearned desperately for the perfect woman, the ideal lover, the matching half of his incomplete heart. When the attorney finally came on the line, he sounded put-upon, as though Junior were the equivalent of a troublesome toe that he would like to shoot off. 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. Then the old man taught it to him. But it wasn't much use, Otter thought, since he had to hide it. "No, I didn't see him," Junior reminded the attorney. "I just assumed, when this harassment started here-". When he noticed that twilight had come and gone, he realized also that he'd walked through Bright Beach, along Pacific Coast Highway, and south into the neighboring town. Perhaps ten miles. RED SKY IN THE morning, sailors take warning; red sky at night, sailors delight. After a little silence Otter said, "Thanks." And he looked up at Hound, one brief, questioning, judging glance. Not all of the pins were knocked to the shear line with a single pull of the trigger. Three pulls were the minimum required, sometimes as many as six, depending on the lock. She lost track of him. Fear knocked, knocked, on the door of her heart, because she was sure that he had vanished the way ships supposedly disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle. A sofa and one armchair provided the seating in the living room. No coffee table. A small table beside the chair. A wall unit held a fine stereo system and a few hundred record albums. "The quarter in the sandwich," Nolly said, because that was the first stunt that Simon Magusson had paid him to perform. Apparently, he didn't lean back far enough, because amazingly he landed on his feet in the winter-faded grass. The shock buckled him, and he dropped to his knees. Still cradling Grace, he lowered her to the ground as gently as he'd ever lowered fragile Perri onto her bed- quite as if he had planned it this way. "No. Rowena dropped those names after the twins' first year. She and I were the only ones who ever used them. Our private little joke. Even the boys wouldn't have remembered." By telephone, he had been prepared for this boy. Strange as it was to find a Bartholomew in their lives, given Enoch Cain's peculiar obsession, Tom nonetheless agreed with Celestina that the wife killer could have no way to know about this child- and could certainly have no logical reason to fear him. The only thing they had in common was Harrison White's sermon, which had inspired this boy's name and might have planted the seed of guilt in Cain's mind. Junior was reminded of a scene in an old movie, something Naomi wanted to watch, a love story set during the Black Plague: a horse drawn cart rolling through the medieval streets of London or Paris, the driver ringing a hand bell and crying, "Bring out your dead, bring out your dead!" If contemporary San Francisco had provided such a convenient service, he wouldn't have had to toss Neddy Gnathic in the Dumpster in the first place. Even when he saw no cop cadaver, no ghoulish grin, no two-bit eyes, Junior was not immediately relieved. Warily, he circled the car, expecting to find the detective crouching and poised to spring. Although a believer, Agnes was not at the moment able to spread the flowers and ferns of faith over the hard, ugly reality of death. Cowled and skeletal, Death was here, all right, scattering his seeds among all her gathered friends, one day to reap them. Oblivious that she and Barty had become the center of attention, Angel said, "Does he ever get the quarters back?" Junior decided to attend the festivities, after all, motivated by the prospect of connecting with a woman more pliant than the Baval Poriferan sculpture. For the first time in many months, Barty didn't want to sleep in the dark. They left the door of the room open, admitting some of the fluorescent glow from the hallway. 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. Nellie found the strength to rise, but having risen, she was unable to speak. Her mouth shaped words, but her voice deserted her. 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. 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. Some information she'd withheld from him: that the cancer might already have spread, that he might still die even after his eyes were removed- and that if it hadn't yet spread, it might soon do so. First room on the left. Move. Kick the door open. The sense of a larger space beyond, no bathroom this time, and darker. Fan the pistol, gripping with both hands. Two quick shots: muffled cough, muffled cough. He summoned enough courage to approach the nightstand. His hand trembled. He half expected the quarter to be illusory; to disappear between his pinching fingers, but it was real. The crazy bitch wielded it with such ferocity that the force of the impact with the floor, rebounding upon her, must have numbed her arms. She stumbled backward, dragging the chair, temporarily unable to lift it. 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. "And there's more," said Vinnie Lincoln, as round as Santa Claus and cherry-cheeked with pleasure at being able to bear these gifts. "The policy

contained a double-indemnity clause in the event of death by accident. The complete tax-free payout is one and a half million." Two cranks operated the winch.. The mortician and his assistant turned the handles in unison, and as the mechanism creaked softly, the casket slowly descended into the hole..Under a declining moon, he fled discreetly three blocks to his Suburban, parked on a parallel street. He encountered no traffic, and on the way, he stripped off the gardening gloves and discarded them in a Dumpster at a house undergoing remodeling..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..She took a deep breath. She lifted her head, straightened her shoulders, and went inside, where a new life waited for her..Nevertheless, when the points of soreness in his brow and cheeks gradually grew worse, he stopped at a service station near Courtland, bought a bottle of Pepsi from a vending machine, and washed down yet another capsule of antihistamines. He also took another antiemetic, four aspirin, and-although he felt no trembling in his bowels-one more dose of paregoric..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..Reflecting upon her son's clever, diligent, and uncomplaining adaptation to darkness, she wished that she had described to him the dazzling sunset under which they had made their journey home. Although her words might have been inadequate to the spectacle, he would have elaborated on them to create a picture in his mind; with his creative skills, the world that he'd lost with his sight might be remade in equal splendor in his imagination..An IV rack stood beside the bed, dripping fluid into his vein, replacing the electrolytes that he had lost through vomiting, most likely medicating him with an antiemetic as well. His right arm was securely strapped to a supporting board, to prevent him from bending his elbow and accidentally tearing out the needle..In that instant, she knew the dreadful shape of the future, if not its fine details..CLOUDS SWARMED THE late-afternoon sun, and the Oregon sky grew sapphire where still revealed. Cops gathered like bright-eyed crows in the lengthening shadow of the fire tower..face looked familiar, and he sensed that he had seen it before in a disquieting context, although the man's identity eluded him.."It's not a specific brand you can't have, it's the whole idea of a candy bar." Vanadium, lending an aura of normalcy to the house. Now he wanted silence, so he would immediately hear another car in the driveway if one arrived..After a silent moment of surprise, Nork or Knacker, or Hisscus, said, "Your sentiment is understandable, Mr. Cain, but it's customary in these matters--". Teasing out the card, Edom saw that it was an ace of diamonds-remarkable in light of Maria Gonzalezs fortune'-telling session last Friday evening. He was more astonished, however, by the name printed in black ink diagonally across the face of the card: BARTHOLOMEW.."I wouldn't just whack anyone, not even a worm bucket like Cain, any more than I would commit suicide. Remember, I believe in eternal consequences."..The short walk across the room, to the hero's table, looked more daunting to Paul than the trek he'd just completed. He was nobody, a small-town pharmacist who missed more work each month, who relied increasingly on his worried employees to cover for him, and who would lose his business if he didn't get a grip on himself. He had never done a great deed, never saved a life. He had no right to impose upon this man, and now he knew he hadn't the nerve to do so, either..In retrospect, coming here wasn't a wise move. Evidently, the detective had been following him. Now, Vanadium would puzzle out a motive for this late-night graveyard tour..Writing came with reading, and in a notebook, he began to make entries about points of interest in the stories that he enjoyed. His Diary of a Book Reader, as he titled it, fascinated Agnes, who read it with his permission; these notes to himself were enthusiastic, earnest, and charming-but literally month by month, Agnes noticed that they grew less naive, more complex, more contemplative..Hope became easier to sustain when late 1966 and 1967 brought the biggest advance in women's fashions since the invention of the sewing needle: the miniskirt, and then the micromini. Already, Mary Quant-of all things, a British designer-had conquered England and Europe with her splendid creation; now she brought America out of the dark ages of psychopathic modesty..Luck favored Paul: The hero was here, having breakfast. He and two other men were deep in conversation at a comer table..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..At the sight of her photograph, she felt herself flush. She hoped none of the pedestrians passing between her and the gallery would look from the photo to her face and recognize her. What had she been.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.."He's a wonderful boy, so very bright, so very full of life. Blindness will be hard, but it won't be the end. He'll cope without the light. It'll be so difficult at first, but this boy ... eventually he'll thrive."..After Victoria had departed, Junior lay smiling at the ceiling, floating on Valium and desire. And vanity..Freed for the moment from the need to be strong for her sleeping Angel or for Wally, Celestina turned to Tom Vanadium, saw in his gray eyes both the sorrow of the world and a hope to match her own, saw in his ruined face the promise of triumph over evil, leaned against him for support, and finally dared to cry..They lived too far from the nearest railroad tracks. He could not rationally expect a derailed train to crash through the garage.."Come with me," Paul Damascus said at once. "To Bright Beach. It is far away from San Francisco, and he'd never think of looking for you there. Why would he? You've no connection to the place. I've got a house with enough room. You're welcome. And you wouldn't be among strangers."..They came to her, picked up the luggage that she had put down, and Edom said, "I'll drive."..Seraphim White had come to California to give birth to him in or to spare her parents-and their congregation--embarrassment..When he located the new grave, approximately where he'd guessed that it would be, he was surprised to find a black granite headstone already set in place, instead of a temporary marker painted with the.She

strove to appear calm, and she must have succeeded, because neither woman seemed to realize that she was scared almost to the point of paralysis. She moved woodenly, joints stiff, muscles tense..Her hands were slender, long-fingered, graceful. The hands of an artist. They were not powerful hands..She wasn't listening closely to him. Numb. She felt as though she were half anesthetized. She was looking past him, at nothing, and his Voice seemed to be coming to her through several layers of surgical masks, though he now wore none at all..She figured that she could stay home, devoting herself to Barty, for perhaps three years before she would be wise to find work..Sometimes Celestina marveled at how intimately and inextricably the tendrils of tragedy and joy were intertwined in the vine of life. Sorrow was often the root of future joy, and joy could be the seed of sorrow yet to come. The layered patterns in the vine were so complex, so enrapturing in their lush detail and so fearsome in their wild inevitability, that she could fill uncountable canvases, through many lifetimes as an artist, striving to capture the enigmatic nature of existence, in all its beauty dark and bright, and in the end merely suggest the palest shadow of its mystery.. "Your dad didn't just like Christmas, he loved Christmas. He started planning for it in June. If there wasn't already a Santa Claus, your father would have taken on the job." In spite of his dumpy appearance-and especially in the dark, where appearances didn't count-Vanadium had the aura of a mystic. Although Junior didn't believe in mystics or in the various unearthly powers they claimed to possess, he knew that mystics who believed in themselves were exceptionally dangerous people..Meanwhile, she could offer him only a few pieces of ice, which he was forbidden to chew. "Let them melt in your mouth." Nolly said, "We've never really had a song of our own, in spite of all the dancing we do. I think this is a good one. But so far, you've only sung it to another man." honor and family. This was life, and everyone lived his life in the shadow of one solemn obligation or another..Shuddering with dread, he placed one hand against the door and slowly pushed it open..One of the hardest things that she had ever done was to leave him then, alone in his room, with the hateful something still quietly growing in his eye. She wanted to move the armchair close to his bed and watch over him throughout the night.

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