

THE PLAYGROUND VOL 12 APRIL 1918

He never passed through a phase during which he grew resistant to hugging or kissing. He was a hand-holding, cuddling boy to whom displays of affection came easily..In her arms she held Bartholomew. The infant was not heavily bundled, for the weather was unseasonably mild..THE CRISP CRACKLE of faux flames, the way they made them in the days of radio dramas, back in the 1930s and '40s, when he was a boy: cellophane..He hadn't paid close attention to those patrons seated at the bar behind him. Now, he turned in his chair to study them..During the past week, he had ferreted out what he could about the nurse. She was thirty, divorced, without kids, and lived alone.. "Wouldn't live in the Caribbean if you paid me," Bill said. "All that humidity. All those bugs." Nolly shuddered. "The wilds of Oregon. I don't intend ever to go there until it's civilized." "That's right," Celestina told Wally. "This isn't wagering. What's wrong with you?" Edom had turned away from the box of groceries that he was packing. Frowning at the pies, he said, "You don't think. . . When she turned to him again, he had already slipped into his jacket and snatched the car keys off the foyer table. He put his left hand under her right arm, as though Agnes were feeble and in need of sup-.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..On this January twilight, as Maria Elena Gonzalez drove south along the coast from Newport Beach, all men of the sea must have been reaching for bottles of rum to celebrate the fruit-punch sky: ripe cherries in the west, blood oranges overhead, clustered grapes dark purple in the east..Clutching the purse as though determined to resist robbery even in death, the guy dropped, sprawled, shuddered, and lay still. He'd gone down with no shout of alarm, with no cry of mortal pain, with so little noise that Junior wanted to kiss him, except that he didn't kiss men, alive or dead, although a man dressed as a woman had once tricked him, and though a dead pianist had once given him a lick in the dark..Angel was lying on a towel on the convertible sofa, where Grace had just changed her diaper..When finally he found his voice, it was rough-sawn with a blade of grief. "My wife. Perri. Perris Jean." "Wally gave her tests. She's got an exceptional understanding of color, spatial relationships, and geometric forms for a child her age. She may be a visual prodigy." "Nature has no maternal instincts," Edom said quietly but with conviction. "To think otherwise is sheer sentimentality at its worst. Nature is our enemy. She's a vicious killer." "Take care he doesn't turn your belt on you with a spell!" said his uncle..At a point where deep water met the shoreline, Junior drove off the road and onto the strand. He parked twenty feet from the water, facing the lake, and switched off the headlights and the engine..The modulated electronic brrrrr was similar to the sound of the telephone in Vanadium's cramped study, on Sunday night. Junior was transported back to that place, that moment in time..As he stepped out of the street, Don't Walk shortened to Walk, and when he checked for pursuit, he found it. Here came Vanadium, who would have been shivering in want of a topcoat if his flesh had been real..Grimacing, she said, "I told the police about your disgusting little come--on with the ice spoon." She wouldn't answer him, but he was as convinced by her silence as he would have been by a blurted confession--or by a denial, for that matter. Her wild eyes convinced him, too, and her trembling mouth. Naomi had come back to be with him, and it could be argued that Seraphim had returned in a sense, too, for this girl was the flesh of Seraphim's flesh, born out of her death..The minister's threat had been forgotten, repressed. At the time, only half--heard, merely kinky background to lovemaking, these words had amused Junior, and he'd given no serious thought to their meaning, to the message of retribution contained in them. Now, in this moment of extreme danger, the inflamed boil of repressed memory burst under pressure, and Junior was shocked, stunned, to realize that the minister had put a curse on him!.Heart racing, but reminding himself that strength and wisdom arose from a calm mind, Junior stood in the center of the small kitchen, slowly turning to study every angle of the room..The driver's door opened, shoving aside a damaged tea table, and a man climbed out of the Pontiac..Devil mountains, sacred islands, sacramental rivers and cities, Jesuits: These spiritual references at every turn made Junior uneasy. This was a haunted night, no doubt about that. He wouldn't have been greatly surprised if he had glanced at his rearview mirror and seen Thomas Vanadium's blue Studebaker Lark Regal closely tailing him, not the real car raised from Quarry Lake, but a ghostly version, with the filthy-scabby-monkey spirit of the cop at the wheel, an ectoplasmic Naomi at his side, Victoria Bressler and Ichabod and Bartholomew Prosser and Neddy Gnathic in the backseat: the Studebaker packed full of spirits like a bozo-stuffed clown car in a circus, though there would be nothing funny about these revenge-minded spooks when the doors flew open and they came tumbling out.."She's got preeclampsia. It's a condition that occurs in about five percent of pregnancies, virtually always after the twenty-fourth week, and usually it can be treated successfully. But I'm not going to sugarcoat this, Celestina. In her case, it's more serious. She hasn't been seeing a doctor, no prenatal care, and here she is in the middle of her thirtieth week, about ten days from delivery." Find the father, kill the son. In just nine days, Junior bedded four beautiful women: one on Christmas Eve, the next on Christmas Night, the third on New Year's Eve, and the fourth on New Year's Day. For the first time in his life-and on all four occasions-his joy in the act was less than complete..same," Agnes admonished. "Who's been raising you, sugarpie, if you don't know that? Are you going to pretend you've been brought up by wolves for nine years?" When people didn't apply themselves to positive goals, to making better lives for themselves, they spent their energy in wickedness. Then..Indeed, even the distinct fragrance of pulp paper, yellow with age, was alone sufficient to start him fantasizing..HAVING COMPLETED HER English lesson, Maria Elena Gonzalez went home with a plastic shopping bag full of precisely damaged clothes and a smaller, paper bag containing cherry muffins for her two girls..No elevator. He didn't have to worry that with no more warning than a ding, doors might slide open, admitting witnesses into the hall..Barty turned away from her,

surveyed the kitchen, and said, "Ah. The twisty is me." Not incidentally, the project served as a vehicle by which some older citizens, in financial crisis, could receive money in a way that spared their dignity, gave them hope, and repaired their damaged self esteem. Agnes asked Obadiah to enrich the project by accepting a one year grant to record the story of his life with the help of the head librarian. Vanadium continued in his characteristic drone, a tone at odds with the colorful content of his speech: "A man takes one look at his wife's body, starts to sweat harder than a copulating hog, spews like a frat boy at the end of a long beer-chugging contest, and chucks till he chucks up blood-that's not the response of your average murderer." Although first-rate, the surgical team wasn't able to reattach the badly torn extremity. Tissue damage was too extensive to permit delicate bone, nerve, and blood-vessel repair. 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. "Both. Brain and heart. But I've thought it through, Daddy. More than anything in my life, I've thought this through." Because of the events regarding Barty and Angel back in January, Celestina, Grace, and Wally were no longer displaced persons waiting to return to San Francisco. They had begun anew here in Bright Beach; and judging by all indications, they were going to be as happy and as occupied with useful work as it was possible to be on this troubled side of the grave. The infant's smile was so captivating and his puzzlement so comically earnest that both expressions worked on Agnes's misery as surely as yeast leavens dough. Her bitter tears turned sweet. Celestina expected to be taken to a waiting room, but instead the nun escorted her to surgical prep. When Victoria finally calmed her racing heart, she returned the spoon to the tray on the nightstand, stoppered the carafe, and said, "That's enough for now, Mr. Cain. In your condition, even too much I melted ice might trigger renewed vomiting." For a while, Junior half convinced himself that the quarter in his cheeseburger, in December '65, was a meaningless coincidence, unrelated to Vanadium. His short tour of the kitchen, in search of the perpetrator, had given him reason to believe the diner's sanitary standards were inadequate. Recalling the greasy men on that culinary death squad, he knew that he'd been fortunate not to discover a dead rodent spread-eagle on the melted cheese, or an old sock. "Frozen firing pin," Cain said. His smile was venomous. "I worked on it. I hoped you'd get here in time to see the consequences of your stupid games." "Too few," said Maria, "might mean you made an admirably small number of moral mistakes but also that you failed to take reasonable risks and didn't make full use of the gift of life." Anyway, if Celestina escaped, there would be a witness, and it wouldn't matter to a jury that she was a talentless bitch who painted kitsch. She would have seen Junior get out of the Mercedes and would be able to provide at least a half-accurate description of the car in spite of the fog. He still hoped to pull this off without having to give up his good life on Russian Hill. "Yours is a harder job than mine," Lipscomb told Grace, dandling Angel as he spoke. "I have no doubt of that." The paramedic, fingers pressed to the radial artery in Junior's right wrist, must have felt a rocket-quick acceleration in his pulse rate. With the infant in her arms, the heavysset nurse pressed in beside Celestina, who. One apartment to the right, one to the left. Junior went to the right, to Apartment 1, where he'd seen the lights come on behind the curtained windows. A dumpster and a dead musician had humbled him as thoroughly as he had ever been humbled before, as completely as violent nervous emesis and volcanic diarrhea had humbled him, and he had no tolerance for being humbled. Humility is for losers. Nothing he had learned about the supernatural had led him closer to a belief in ghosts and in all that ghosts implied. His faith still reposed entirely in Enoch Cain Jr., and he refused to make room on his altar for anyone or anything other than himself. Unquestionably, if he hadn't killed Vanadium, the maniac cop would have blown him away. That was clearly an act of self-defense. The black service road seemed to come out of nowhere, then to vanish into a void, and Junior suddenly felt dangerously isolated, alone as he had never been, and vulnerable. A pink spot in the center of Victoria's forehead marked the point of impact. Soon it would be an ugly bruise. The skull bone did not appear to have been cratered. "Mommy, watch!" He turned in the deluge with his arms held out from his sides. "Not scary!" St. Mary's social workers did not arrive with dawn, so Celestina was given the privacy of one of their offices, where the wet face of the morning pressed blurrily at the windows, and where she phoned her parents with the terrible news. From here, too, she arranged with a mortician to collect Phimie's body from the cold-storage locker in the hospital morgue, embalm it, and have it flown home to Oregon. Indeed, he would get through the rest of 1965 without resorting to another homicide. The nonfatal shooting in September would be regrettable, quite messy, painful-but necessary, and calculated to do as little damage as possible. Too late for interrogation now, with Vanadium bludgeoned into eternal sleep and resting under many fathoms of cold bedding. In Maria's kitchen, still just four days past Christmas, Agnes let dissolve her stoic mask, and wept at last. Solitude, however, was his preference. He found the sympathy of friends unbearable, a constant reminder that Perri was gone. To the window in the driver's door, Barty came with a repertoire of comic expressions, mugging at his mother, sticking one finger up his nose and exaggeratedly boring with it as though exploring for nasal nuggets. "Not scary, Mommy!" At the conclusion of the ceremony, he relinquished his secondhand sight. He would live in darkness until Easter of 1986, though every minute of the day was brightened by his wife. His waitress was a cutie. She flirted with him, and he knew he could have her if he wanted. A quick survey of the lavatory floor. The musician hadn't left anything behind, neither a popped button nor crimson petals from his boutonniere. He thought he heard the soft swoosh of knife-edge wings slicing the January air. He dared not look up. More in his throat. The agony. Darkness poured into his head, as if it were blood rising relentlessly from his flooded stomach and esophagus. Two things about him were remarkable, beginning with his face. His head was wrapped with white gauze bandages, so he looked like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man* or like Humphrey Bogart in that movie about the escaped convict who has plastic surgery to foil the police and to start a new life with Lauren Bacall. Blond hair sprouted from the top of the elaborate wrappings. Otherwise, only his eyes, his nostrils, and his lips were uncovered. 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..Having arrived at this same astonishing but nonetheless obvious conclusion, Harrison said, "Someone has to've been hurt." He hurried out of the kitchen, through the dining room, with Paul close behind him..Turning to face his four trailing escorts, all of whom were hunch shouldered and stiff-necked with tension, Barty said, "What's for dinner? ".Moving around the front of the station wagon, waving at his mother, reveling in her astonishment, Barty shouted, "Not scary!..Junior had seen the silvery coin snapping off the cop's thumb and spinning upward. Now it was gone, as though it had vanished in midair..Junior phoned a twenty-four-hour-a-day locksmith and paid premium post midnight rates to have the double deadbolts re-keyed..Then by ambulance to the hospital, whisked into surgery, and for a while, blessed unconsciousness..Even as the morning matured, the fog and the rain conspired to bar all but a faint gray daylight from St. Mary's. Shadows flourished.. "Maria brought that from Mexico," Barty said. "She thought it was pretty funny. So do I. It's a hoot. Mom says it isn't really blasphemous, because it wasn't meant to be by the people who made it, and because Jesus would want you to have cookies, and, besides, it reminds us to be thankful for all the good things we get."..He kept a few paperbacks of Caesar Zedd's work in the bathroom, so that time spent on the john wouldn't be wasted. Some or, his deepest insights into the human condition and his best ideas for self-improvement had come in this place, where Zedd's luminous words seemed to shine a brighter light into his mind upon rereading..A pathologically suspicious cop, aware of Junior's acute.; emesis following Naomi's death, might imagine a connection between this epic bout of diarrhea and Victoria's murder, and Vanadium's disappearance Here was an avenue of speculation that he did not want to encourage..Everyone from the pie caravan had gathered under the oak. The entire family, in its many names, adults and children, heads tipped back hands shielding their eyes from the late sun, watched Barty's progress in all but complete silence..The paramedic put aside the needle, having used it, and grabbed the paddles of a..He snatched up the wine list before she could look at it. "If you're paying, then I'm ordering whatever costs the most, regardless of what it tastes like."..Because he hadn't heard Victoria Bressler speak in so long-and then only on two occasions-and because the woman on the phone had spoken so softly, Junior couldn't tell whether or not their voices were one and the same.. "I should," Tom agreed, "but the point is this. . ." With the finesse of a magician, he allowed the salt shaker to slip out of the concealment of his palm, and stood it beside the pepper. "This is also me."..In the kitchen again, Junior spread the blanket on the floor, to one side of the blood. He rolled Vanadium onto the blanket, and drew the ends of it together, fashioning a sled with which to drag the detective out of the house.. "Sure. That's how it works with everything. Everything that can happen does happen, and each different way of happening makes a whole new place."..Switching on the lights as he went, Junior sought the source of the serenade. He carried the 9-mm pistol, which would have been useless against a spirit visitor; but his extensive reading about ghosts hadn't convinced him that they were real. His faith in the effectiveness of bullets and pewter candlesticks, for that matter-remained undiminished..Paul withdrew the pistol from the drawer. The weapon didn't feel as good to him as guns always felt in the hands of pulp heroes..THE SANDMAN WAS powerless to cast a spell of sleep while Junior spent the night flushing away enough water to drain a reservoir..She realized she hadn't turned on the radio. Before she could reach for the switch, she was asleep..Twice would indicate a dangerous mania. Three times would be indefensible. But once was healthy experimentation. A learning experience..In Junior's estimation, this was not the way that a normal person lived. This was the home of a deranged loner, a dangerously obsessive man..there in more genteel and gilded ages, and her flights of imagination sometimes acquired such vivid detail that they were eerily like memories.. "You're heaven-sent," Grace assured Paul at breakfast Saturday morning. "With all your stories, you lifted our hearts when we most needed to be lifted."..Junior had heard of this invention, but until now he'd never seen one. He supposed that an obsessive like Vanadium might go to any lengths, including this exotic technology, to avoid missing an important call..Paul didn't realize that Grace had followed them into the living room until she screamed. She started to push past him, heading toward her husband even as Harrison went down..which was tied a gift tag bearing a hand-printed message: With our compliments. Thanks for your business..Gradually, she perceived that Lipscomb was more troubled than he should have been, considering that his patient had died through no fault of his own..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..He hadn't seen Thomas Vanadium since Monday, at the cemetery, and Vanadium hadn't pulled any tricks since leaving twenty-five cents at his bedside that same night. Almost four days undisturbed by the hectoring detective. In matters Vanadium, however, Junior had learned to be wary, prudent..The friendship, the work, and not least of all the sense of home and belonging that everyone felt within minutes of crossing Agnes's threshold-these things appealed to Celestina and Grace. But they didn't want Paul to feel that his hospitality was unappreciated..Agnes returned home from a pie run with the usual team-grown to five vehicles, including paid employees-to find a gathering in the yard and Barty halfway up the oak..The symptoms that terrified Phimie-the headache, crippling abdominal pain, dizziness, vision problems-had entirely relented. Possibly they had been more psychological than physical in nature..As usual, Vanadium had spoken in a monotone, putting no special emphasis on those two words. Yet Junior sensed that the detective harbored doubts about the explanation of the girl's death..He went upstairs to change out of his dark blue suit and badly scuffed black shoes..Surprisingly, he received a lot of gratification from voicing this insult, even though Vanadium was too dead to hear it.. "That's unusual, too, and I wish the etiology of this disease, which is exceedingly well understood, gave us reason to hope based on the transience of the symptoms ... but it doesn't."..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..As terrible as the situation was for Barty, Agnes knew that it was equally difficult for Paul. She could only hold him in the night, and let herself be held. And more than once, she told him,

"If worse comes to worst, don't you go walking again." Maria fished another chip from the sweating carafe, rejected it, and scooped out a larger piece. She hesitated, staring at it for a moment, and then spooned it between Agnes's lips. "Water can be broken if it will be first made into ice." 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..Anyway, the thing that scared her was not the monstrous father of this child. The fearsome thing was the decision that she had made a few minutes ago, in the unused hospital room on the seventh floor..Traumatized by the violence in her mother's bedroom, not fully aware of what happened to Wally, Angel had been tearful and anxious. A thoughtful physician gave her a glass of orange juice spiked with a small dose of a sedative, and a nurse provided pillows. Bedded down on two pillow-padded chairs, wearing a rose-colored robe over yellow pajamas, she gave herself as fully to sleep as she always did, sedative or not, which was every bit as fully as she gave herself to life when she was awake..As spectacularly busty as the not-yet-dead Jayne Mansfield, Frieda never wore a bra. In 1966, this free-swinging style was little seen. Initially, Junior didn't realize bralessness was a declaration of Frieda's liberation; he thought it meant she was a slut..An unfortunately bumpy ride for the deceased: along the hallway, through the foyer, across the entry threshold, down the porch steps, across a lawn dappled with pine shadows and yellow moonlight, to the graveled driveway. No complaints..Angel returned to the table for apple juice and to announce, "They got a cookie-jar Jesus!".The calls to Bellini in San Francisco and to others in Oregon were made with a prayer for news, but the prayer went unanswered. Cain had not been seen, heard from, smelled, intuited, or located by the pestering clairvoyants who had attached themselves to the sensational case..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..Odder yet, the pianist had studied him with a keen interest that was inexplicable, since they were essentially strangers. When caught staring, he'd appeared rattled, turning away quickly, eager to avoid further contact..Nevertheless, Thomas Vanadium's hostile ghost, that terrible prickly bur of stubborn energy, wasn't done with Junior yet. Until Bartholomew was dead, the cop's filthy-scabby-monkey spirit would keep coming back and coming back, and it would surely grow more violent..Junior remembered the very words the detective had used: They say she died in a traffic accident.."You didn't at all," Dr. Salk assured him. "I need to talk to you. If you would give me a little of your time..."After a while, a voice broke the vacuum-perfect silence. Bob Chicane. His instructor..Inevitably, he had to wonder if Naomi had kept her pregnancy secret because, indeed, she suspected that the child wasn't her husband's..The paper towels were spotted with butter. He crumpled them and threw them in the trash.."Pie, pie, pie, pie, pie, pie, pie, pie," Barty repeated in the same tone of self-satisfied delight that he used when announcing "Barty potty"..Edom felt uneasy in this kingdom of a strange god. The god that his brother feared was humanity, its dark compulsions, its arrogance. Edom, on the other hand, trembled before Nature, whose wrath was so great that one day she would destroy all things, when the universe collapsed into a super dense nugget of matter the size of a pea..Perhaps his sister intuited what Edom was about to say, because she didn't let him get started..After the latest concerned nurse departed, Sheena leaned close. She cruelly pinched Junior's cheek between thumb and forefinger, as if she might tear off a gobbet of flesh and pop it into her mouth..At the elevators, the orderly suggested that Edom and Jacob take a second cab and meet them on the surgical floor..To celebrate, upon leaving the gallery, he went to the coffee shop in the Fairmont Hotel, atop Nob Hill, determined to have a beer and a cheeseburger..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..You ever hear it, Enoch? I'm that someone for you, of course, in a romantic sense..Like a disc fish with silvery scales, the coin lay in the cup of Junior's palm. Directly over his life line..Like the chicken egg. As weary as she was, Agnes could not at once puzzle out the meaning of those four words. Then: "Oh. He's in an incubator." yunh," so she nodded as vigorously as she was able to do, and tightened her grip on Celestina's hand.."Simon's a funny duck," Vanadium said, "but I like him more than a little and trust him implicitly. He wanted to know what he could do to help. Initially, my speech was slurred, I had partial paralysis in my left arm, and I'd lost fifty-four pounds. I wasn't going to be looking for Cain for a long time, but it turned out Simon knew where he was..He was too sensitive a soul to be able to take either a handsaw or a power saw to a corpse.."Do you want me to call and confirm how Vanadium was harassing you up here?" asked Magusson.."I can try, your highness.."He produced her coat as if by legerdemain. Magically, she found her arms in the sleeves and the collar around her neck, though given her size lately, putting on anything other than a hat usually required strategy and persistence..He arrived at the open door, grinning. No Cheshire-cat grin, hanging disembodied on the air, teeth without tabby. Grin with full Barty.

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