

## ASHLIES POCKET POSH JOURNAL CHEVRON

The pewter bludgeon slammed into the back of his skull with a hard pack. The scalp tore, blood sprang forth, and the man fell as hard as Victoria had fallen under the influence of a good Merlot, although he went facedown, not faceup as she had done. 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. She leaned against the apartment door for a long moment, holding on to the doorknob and to the thumb-turn of the second deadbolt, as though she were convinced that if she let go, she would float off the floor like a cloud-stuffed child. When the highway passed through a sunless ravine, he had broken into a sour sweat at the sight of the bloody pulsing reflections of the revolving rooftop beacons on the bracketing cut-shale walls. Now and then, the siren shrieked to clear traffic ahead, and he felt the urge to scream with it, to let loose a wail of terror and anguish and confusion and loss. Now, the hateful music unnerved him. He became convinced that if he went home alone, the phantom chanteuse—whether Victoria Bressler's vengeful ghost or something else—would croon to him once more. He wanted company and distraction, after all. Uncommon dexterity is essential for anyone who hopes to become a highly skilled card mechanic, but it is not the sole requirement. A capacity to endure grim tedium while engaging in thousands of hours of patient practice is equally important. The finest card mechanics also exhibit complex memory function of a breadth and depth that the average person would find extraordinary. This morning he had changed the sheets. Naomi's scent was no longer with him in the bedclothes. Before Celestina probed and perhaps touched upon a sore tooth of truth, Tom launched into the story of King Obadiah, Pharaoh of the Fantastic, who had taught him all he knew about sleight of hand. Tom stared down into the oceanic depths of the city, through the reefs of buildings, to the lamp-fish cars schooling through the great trenches. He didn't rely, either, on a sixth sense to detect obstacles or open spaces, which some blind people claimed to have. Sometimes instinct told him that in his path was an object that ordinarily would not have been there; but as often as not, it went undetected, and unless he was using his cane, he tripped over it. The sixth sense was greatly overrated. Each booth was at a large window, and each window provided a view of the street. Vanadium wasn't out there, watching from the sidewalk, either: no glimpse of his pan-flat face shining in the December sun. The hospital was eerily quiet, except for the occasional squeak of rubber-soled shoes on the vinyl floor of the corridor. Throughout this procedure, Barty appeared solemn and thoughtful. When he had squeezed the tenth toe, he stared at it, brow furrowed. He switched off the flashlight and stood solemnly for a moment, paying his respects to Seraphim. She had been so sweet, so innocent, so supple, so exquisitely proportioned. "Nervous," he said, and howled when one of the paramedics proved to be a sadist masquerading as an angel of mercy. With a smudge of flour on one cheek, wiping her hands on a red-and-white checkered dishtowel, Agnes answered the door, saw the car in the driveway, and said, "Paul! You're not walking?". The guest room. Bring Grace to the window. Disengage the latch. No good. Warped or painted shut. Small panes, sturdy mullions too difficult to break out. "But let's pretend it's me, okay? So here I am, stepping off the curb without looking both ways." In agreement, Maria pushed the stack of unused cards aside, and she peered at her hands as if she wanted to scrub them for a long time under hot water. Fortunately, at least the desk was cigarette-scarred, because it came with the office. It had been the property of a skip-tracer named Otto Zelm, who'd made a good living at the kind of work Nolly avoided out of boredom: tracking down deadbeats and repossessing their vehicles. On a stakeout, Zelm fell asleep in his car, while smoking, thereby triggering the payoff of both life- and casualty-insurance policies, and freeing the lease on this furnished space. Commit and command. It doesn't matter so much whether the course of action to which you commit is prudent or hopelessly rash, doesn't matter whatsoever whether society at large thinks it's a "good" thing that you're doing or a "bad" thing. As long as you commit without reservation you will inevitably command, because so few people are ever willing to commit to anything, right or wrong, wise or unwise, that those who plunge are guaranteed to succeed more often than not even when their actions are reckless and their cause is idiotic. "In addition to that policy," said Vinnie, "there's another. . . --he filled his lungs, hesitated, then exhaled the air and the sum with a tremor---seven hundred fifty thousand. Three-quarters of a million dollars." Sudden rain spared her the need to finish the sentence. A few fat drops drew both their faces to the sky, and even as they rose to their feet, this brief light paradiddle of sprinkles gave way to a serious drumming. A siren in the city wailed toward St. Mary's. An ambulance. Through streets bustling with hope, always this lament for the dying. Then he looked up at the massive limbs overhead, and the mood changed: A sense of impending insight at once gave way to the fear that an unsuspected fissure in a huge limb might crack through at this precise moment, crushing him under a ton of wood, or that the Big One, striking now, would topple the entire oak. The reception still roared in both showrooms of the gallery. Legions of the uncultured, taste-challenged in every regard except in their appreciation for hors d'oeuvres, yammered about art and chased their cloddish opinions with mediocre champagne. "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." After the detective returned the box to the nightstand, the coin began to turn again. "You figure all this," Jolene asked, "because Mother Nature gives us a nice warm day in January?" 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. "I'll show you some. That's what Gelluk's after. The ore of watermetal. Watermetal eats all the other metals, even gold, see. On the two-chair bed beside her mother, Angel issued

small cries of distress in her sleep. Whatever presences flocked around her in the dream, they weren't baby chickens..Out of respect for his mother, Barty struggled to hold fast to his eyeless second sight, living in the idea of a world where he still had vision, until she had been accorded the honors she deserved and had been laid to rest beside his father..break and conversation among the customers fell into a lull. When the bar phone rang, though it was muted, he heard it at his table..Traditional logic argued that an infant, no more than two weeks old, could not be a serious threat to a grown man.. "With this money, you won't have to cut back on the number of pies you give away--and all of that." "Money's no object. I can afford whatever you'd like to charge. And I'd be a diligent student." AFTER THE ENCOUNTER with the quarter-spitting vending machines, Junior wanted to kill another Bartholomew, any Bartholomew, even if he had to drive to some far suburb like Terra Linda to do it, even if he had to drive farther and stay overnight in a Holiday ay Inn an eat steam-table food off a buffet crawling with other diners' cold germs and garnished with their loose hairs..Barty looked at Angel, and Angel looked at Barty, and they dropped to their knees on the grass before their daughter. They were both grinning ... and then their grins stiffened a little..The silence in this city of the dead was complete. The night lay breathless, stirring not one whisper from the stationed evergreens that stood sentinel over generations of bones..The kitchen door stood open and full of light, but he missed it by two feet. He felt along the back wall of the house, discovered the door casing and then the opening, probed with the cane for the threshold, and stepped into the doorway..Spinning off the stool, the bun cap in one hand and the mustard dispenser clutched in the other, Junior surveyed the long narrow diner. Looking for the maniac cop. The dead maniac cop. He half expected to see Thomas Vanadium: head crusted in blood, face bashed to pulp, caked in quarry silt, and dripping water as though he'd climbed out of his Studebaker coffin just minutes ago..Before the pianist could cry out, Junior drove him between the toilet and the sink, slamming him against the wall hard enough to knock loose his breath and to cause the water to slosh audibly in the nearby toilet tank..the social worker and her family. Husband, wife, daughter, son. The little girl smiled shyly through braces. The boy was impish..This consequence of rape, the baby, was less baby to Celestina than cancer, a malignancy excised rather than a life delivered. She had been no more impelled to study the child than she would have been, charmed to examine the glistening gnarls and oozing convolutions of a freshly plucked tumor. Consequently, she could remember nothing of its squinched face..He had taken refuge in meditation, because he'd been frustrated by his continuing failure in the Bartholomew hunt and disturbed by his apparently paranormal experiences with quarters and with phone calls from the dead. More deeply disturbed than he had realized or had been able to admit.."Good day, sir," Lipscomb said, closing the door in Neddy's face, possibly compressing his nose and bruising his boutonniere..Vanadium's smile, in that tragically fractured face, might have alarmed most people, but Kathleen found it appealing because of the indestructible spirit it revealed..He hurried into the bedroom and switched on the nightstand lamp, without concern for whether the light might be seen from the street..Because they knew the date of the rape, and because that attack had been Phimie's sole sexual experience, the day of impregnation could be fixed, delivery calculated with more precision than usual..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..In her arms, little Barty burbled contentedly, unaware that his destiny supposedly included epic love, fabulous riches, and violence..Matching his mother's whisper, taking obvious delight in their conspiracy, he said, "Our own secret society."..The moment he had seen the building in which Nolly maintained an office-an aged three-story brick structure in the North Beach district, a seedy strip club occupying the ground floor-Junior knew he'd found the breed of snoop he needed. The detective was at the top of six flights of narrow stairs-no elevator-at the end of a dreary hallway with worn linoleum and with walls mottled by stains of an origin best left unconsidered. The air smelled of cheap disinfectant, stale cigarette smoke, stale beer, and dead hopes..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..That last part was true. He just wasn't loose in this world anymore. And in the world to which he'd gone, he would not find easy victims..In the first two weeks, when she wasn't on pie caravans, Agnes received guests in numbers that taxed her. But there were so many people she wanted to see one last time. She fought hard, giving the disease all the what-for that she could, and she held fast to hope, but she received the visitors nonetheless, just in case.."And in some of them, maybe I died the night you were born, and you live alone with your dad." "And you give yourself far too little credit," Salk continued gently. "There's no doubt in my mind that Perri was a hero. But she was married to a hero, as well."..Instead of staring at Barty directly, he watched Angel as she studied the eyeless boy. She had exhibited no horror at the concave slackness of his closed lids, and when one lid fluttered up to reveal the dark hollow socket, she hadn't shown any revulsion. Now she moved closer to Barty's chair, and when she touched his cheek, just below his missing left eye, the boy didn't flinch in surprise..At the grave, they arrived with red and white roses. Agnes carried the red, and Barty brought the white..She started to get up from the chair behind the desk, but he encouraged her to stay seated..Maybes are for babies, Zedd tells us in Act Now, Think Later. Learning to Trust Your Instincts..For a while, Junior profited enormously from Tammy's investment advice, and the sex was great. As a thank-you for the hefty trading commissions she earned-and not incidentally for all the orgasms-Tammy gave him a Rolex. He didn't mind her four cats, didn't even care when the four grew to six, then to eight..LEFT HAND ON the banister, right hand with knife tucked close to his side and ready to thrust, Tom Vanadium climbed cautiously but quickly to the upper floor, glancing back twice to be sure that Cain didn't slip in behind him..He woke several times that night, instantly alert for a ghostly serenade, but he heard no otherworldly crooning..Even without the dangling cigarette and without the

cynical sneer, Nolly had an air of toughness worthy of Sam Spade, largely because the face that nature had given him was a splendid disguise for the sentimental sweetie who lived behind it. With his bull neck, with his strong hands, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to expose his lovely hairy forearms, he made a properly intimidating impression: as if Humphrey Bogart, Sydney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre had been put in a blender and then poured into one suit. The rain-washed street shimmered greasily under the tires, and the intersection lay halfway up a long hill, so gravity was aligned with fate against them. The driver's side of the Pontiac lifted. Beyond the windshield, the main drag of Bright Beach tilted crazily. The passenger's side slammed against the pavement. By the time he reached the airport, located a private-charter company, chased up the owner through the night-security man, and arranged to be flown at once to Eugene, Oregon, aboard a twin-engine Cessna, the points of pain in his face had begun to throb. "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 thirtyeighth week, about ten days from delivery." A spirit-shredding bleakness clawed at her, but she couldn't permit it to leave her in tatters. If she traded hope for despair, as her brothers had done, Bartholomew would be finished before he'd begun. She owed him optimism, lessons in the joy of life. To his surprise, when Naomi expressed an interest in romance, Junior was a bull again. He would have thought he had left his best stuff at Reverend Harrison White's parsonage. Tom knew only three of the eight. Grace White, Angel, and Paul Damascus. The others were introduced quickly by Celestina. Agnes Lampion, their hostess. Edom and Jacob Isaacson, brothers to Agnes. Maria Gonzalez, best friend to Agnes. And Barty. "I haven't disturbed him," said the visitor, taking his cue from the doctor and keeping his voice low. 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. During the preparation of the cards, Barty had fallen asleep in his mother's arms, but with the revelation of his name on the ace, he had awakened again, perhaps because with his head resting on her bosom, he was alarmed by the sudden acceleration of her heartbeat. Magusson considered the assaults on Victoria and on Vanadium to be hideous crimes, of course, but he also viewed them as affronts to his own dignity and reputation. He expected a felonious client, rewarded with four and a quarter million instead of jail time, to be grateful and thereafter to walk a straight line. 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. out of hand. "Well ... yes, I suppose so." Spineless, unethical quack bastard, Junior thought bitterly. THE MORNING THAT it happened was bright and blue in March, two months after Barty took Angel for a dry walk in wet weather, seven weeks after Celestina married Wally, and five weeks after the happy newlyweds completed their purchase of the Galloway house next door to the Lampion place. Selma Galloway, retired from a professorship years earlier, had subsequently retired further, taking advantage of the equity in her long-owned home to buy a little condo on the beach in nearby Carlsbad. This humble house wasn't where you expected to hear an elaborate custom doorbell-or even any doorbell at all, since knuckles on wood were the cheapest announcement of a visitor. Vanadium flipped the quarter straight into the air and at once spread his arms, palms turned up to show that his hands were empty. From the bathroom, Junior gathered an electric razor and toiletries. He added these to the suitcases. Joey was standing just outside, gazing in at her. His blue eyes were seas where sorrow sailed. 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. Junior held the silencer-fitted 9-mm pistol under his left arm, clamped against his side, freeing both hands to use the automatic pick. Blink, the living room. Turning off Sinatra halfway through "It Gets Lonely Early." Junior forgot all about seduction. "And she--what?--She adopted her sister's baby?" With no clear awareness of having left the guest room, Paul looked down the enclosed stairs. 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. "Supposing he's senile, wouldn't he possibly think you were his long-lost brother or someone?" "Thank you, Nurse Bressler," he said most solemnly, matching her tone, barely able to control the urge to glance at her, smile, and give her another preview of his quick, pink tongue. All the way back to the ridge, sitting up front beside a county deputy in a police cruiser, with an ambulance and other patrol cars racing close behind them, Junior had shaken uncontrollably. When he tried to respond to the officer's questions, his uncharacteristically thin voice cracked more often than not, and he was able to croak only, "Jesus, dear Jesus," over and over. After a day of work, the pencil portrait of Nella Lombardi was finished. The second piece in the series-an extrapolation of her appearance at age sixty-was begun. "Will do. Check out those paintings he collects. People pay real money for them, even people who've never been in a looney bin." She had expected horror, although perhaps not a horror quite as stark as this, and she had also expected to be crushed by it, destroyed, because although she was able to survive any misery that might be visited upon her, she didn't think that she possessed the fortitude to endure the suffering of her innocent child. Yet she listened, and she received the terrible burden of the news, and her bones did not at once turn to dust, though unfeeling dust was what she now preferred to be. Wally and Celestina went to dinner at the Armenian restaurant from which he'd gotten takeout on the day in '65 that he rescued her and Angel from Neddy Gnathic. Red tablecloths, white dishes, dark wood paneling, a cluster of candles in red glasses on each table, air

redolent of garlic and roasted peppers and cubeb and sizzling soujouk-plus a personable staff, largely of the owners' family-created an atmosphere as right for celebration as for intimate conversation, and Celestina expected to enjoy both, because this promised to be a most momentous day in more ways than one..Junior, putting himself in the detective's place, could think of a few reasons for this visit to Seraphim's grave. Unfortunately, not one of them supported his contention that he was an innocent man.."The exquisite kind," he replied, glad that he had read so many books on the art of seduction and therefore knew precisely the right thing to say..Occasionally he woke in the night and heard himself murmuring the mantra aloud, which apparently he had been repeating ceaselessly in his sleep. "Find the father, kill the son." In April, Junior discovered three Bartholomews. Investigating these targets, prepared to commit homicide, he learned that none had a son named Bartholomew or had ever adopted a child..Angel cocked her head and studied his left hand, which he had closed while opening his right. She pointed. "It's there."..Junior was starving, but he didn't trust his bowels enough to risk dinner in a restaurant. The affliction seemed to have passed, but it might recur when he had food in his system again..On a street a half mile from the airport in Eugene, he sat in the parked Dodge long enough to gingerly unwind the bandages and use a tissue to wipe off the pungent but useless salve he'd purchased at a pharmacy. Although he pressed the Kleenex to his face so gently that the pressure might not have broken the surface tension on a pool of water, the agony of the touch was so great that he nearly passed out. The rearview mirror revealed clusters of hideous, large, red knobs with glistening yellow heads, and at the sight of himself, he actually did pass out for a minute or two, just long enough to dream that he was a grotesque but misunderstood creature being pursued through a stormy night by crowds of angry villagers with torches and pitchforks, but then the throbbing agony revived him..Unobtrusively, Junior followed the musician across the large front room, but by an indirect arc, using the babbling bourgeoisie for cover..Police identified Junior as the prime suspect, and newspapers featured his photograph in most stories. They referred to him as "handsome," "dashing," "a man with movie-star good looks." He was said to be well known in San Francisco's avant-garde arts community. He got a thrill when he discovered that Sklent was quoted as calling him "a charismatic figure, a deep thinker, a man -with exquisite artistic taste .... so clever he could get away with murder as easily as anyone else might get away with double-parking. " "It's people like him," Sklent continued, "who confirm the view of the world that informs my painting."..A fine carpenter can wield a hammer with an economy of movement and accuracy as elegant as the motions of a symphony conductor with a baton. A cop directing traffic can make a rough ballet out of the work. However, of all the humble tasks that men and women can transform into visual poetry by the application of athletic agility and grace, clambering into a Dumpster holds the least promise of beautification.. "But you don't understand." She recounted the extraordinary draw of aces during the fortune-telling session Friday evening..This galerieur was tall, with silver hair, chiseled features, and the all-knowing, imperious manner of a gynecologist to royalty. He wore a well-tailored gray suit, and his gold Rolex was the very watch that Wroth Griskin might have killed for in his salad days..Agnes's chilled bones. Pushing a tangle of wet hair away from her face, she realized that her hands were shaking..Maria arranged five place settings instead of four. The fifth--complete with silverware, waterglass, and wineglass--was at the head of the table, in memoriam of Joey..The cop weighed too much to be carried any distance, the blanket proved effective, the decision to drag him was wise, and the whole process was value neutral..The ghost cop was forty feet behind him, beyond ranks of other pedestrians, every one of whom might as well have been faceless now, smooth and featureless from brow to chin, because suddenly Junior could see no countenance other than that of the walking dead man. The haunting visage bobbed up and down as the grim spirit strode along, vanishing and reappearing and then vanishing again among all the bobbing and swaying heads of the intervening multitudes..Twice would indicate a dangerous mania. Three times would be indefensible. But once was healthy experimentation. A learning experience..The telephone was operative, and Vanadium dialed the number of the building superintendent, Sparky Vox. Sparky had an apartment in the basement, on the upper of two subterranean floors, adjacent to the garage entrance..For a finder's fee, Junior was put in touch with a papermaker named Google. This was not his real name, but with his crossed eyes, large rubbery lips, and massively prominent Adam's apple, he was as perfect a Google as ever there had been..He had time to think of quite a few, because he drove five miles per hour below the posted speed limit. He couldn't risk being stopped for a traffic violation when Thomas Vanadium, the human stump, was dead and bundled in the back..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..Recently, Wally administered to Angel a set of apperception tests for three-year-olds, and the results indicated that she might not ever be a math whiz or a verbal gymnast, but that she might be highly talented in other ways. Her appreciation of color, her innate understanding of the derivation of secondary hues from the primary colors, her sense of spatial relationships, and her recognition of basic geometric forms regardless of the angle at which they were presented were all far beyond what was exhibited by other kids her age. Wally said she was visually, rather than verbally, gifted, that she would undoubtedly exhibit increasing precociousness in matters artistic, that she might follow Celestina's career path, and that she might even prove to be a prodigy..As she turned away from him and continued along the hall toward the kitchen, Agnes said, "They'll be as good as new when she's mended them.".. "I don't want an attorney." He closed his eyes, lowered his head to the pillow, and sighed. "I just want ... peace."..He'd never taken too much from any one game. He was a discreet thief, charming his victims with amusing patter. Because he was so ingratiating and seemed only mildly lucky, no one begrudged him his winnings. Soon, he was more flush than he'd ever been as a magician..She wanted to go to San Francisco with Celestina, to have the baby

in the city, where the father-and not incidentally her friends and Reverend White's parishioners-would never know she'd given birth. The more her parents and sister argued against this plan, the more agitated Phimie became, until they worried that they would jeopardize her health and mental stability if they didn't do as she wished..The bright side was easy to see. If Vanadium's reputation among other cops and among prosecutors was that of a paranoid, a pathetic a after phantom perpetrators, his unsupported belief that Naomi.Then Agnes said, "Well, it's clear to me that you won't be able to talk out your life in just one year. Should be a two-year grant."."It sure is," Barty said. When only a mortified silence followed his remark, he added: "Gee, I thought that was kinda funny."..yuhn," so she nodded as vigorously as she was able to do, and tightened her grip on Celestina's hand..Candle flames blurred into bright smears, and the faces of her good parents shimmered like the half-seen countenances of angels in dreams..Why Cain, even if he was the father, should be interested in the little girl was a mystery to Tom Vanadium. This totally self-involved, spookily hollow man held nothing sacred; fatherhood would have no appeal for him, and he certainly wouldn't feel any obligation to the child that had resulted from his assault on Phimie..To the windows, then, drawing all the blinds securely down. And still, irrationally, she felt watched..Too late for interrogation now, with Vanadium bludgeoned into eternal sleep and resting under many fathoms of cold bedding..This graciousness didn't free Paul to speak. Instead, he felt his throat thicken, trapping his voice more tightly still..Since the cops believed that Junior accidentally shot himself while searching for a nonexistent burglar, he was already in their book as an idiot. If he tried to explain how Vanadium had tormented him with the quarter, and how a quarter turned up, of all places, in his cheeseburger, they would figure him for a hopeless hysteric.."Thirsty," Agnes rasped. Her voice was Sahara sand abrading anienct stone, the dry whisper of a pharaoh's mummy talking to itself in a vaulted sealed for three thousand years..Ghosts. Sklent was an atheist, and yet he believed in spirits. Here's how that works: Heaven, Hell, and God do not exist, but human beings are as much energy as flesh, and when the flesh gives out, the energy goes on. "We're the most stubborn, selfish, greedy, grubbing, vicious, psychotic, evil species in the universe," Sklent explained, "and some of us just refuse to die, we're too hardass to die. The spirit is a prickly bur of energy that sometimes clings to places and people that were once important to us, so then you get haunted houses, poor bastards still tormented by their dead wives, and crap like that. And sometimes, the bur attaches itself to the embryo in some slut who's just been knocked up, so you get reincarnation. You don't need a god for all this. It's just the way things are. Life and the afterlife are the same place, right here, right now, and we're all just a bunch of filthy, scabby monkeys tumbling through an endless damn series of barrels."..As one of the two paramedics hurried to the ambulance van and scrambled into the driver's seat, Agnes suffered another contraction so severe that for a tremulous moment, at the peak of the agony, she almost lost consciousness..He repressed the scream, however, because he sensed that if he gave voice to it, he wouldn't be able to silence himself for a long long time..During the past ten days, he'd proved that he was clever, bold, with exceptional inner resources. He needed to tap his deep well of strength and resolve now, more than ever. He'd been through far too much, accomplished too much, to be brought down by mere biology..Somehow, Vanadium's malevolent spirit was also to blame for Junior's failure to find a new heart mate, in spite of all the women he'd been through. Undoubtedly, when Bartholomew was dead and Vanadium vanquished with him, romance and true love would bloom..As always in uncertainty, she asked herself what her mother would do in this situation. Grace, of infinite grace, unfailingly did precisely the needed thing, knew exactly the right words to console, to enlighten, to charm a smile out of even the miserable. Often, however, the needed thing involved no words, because in our journey we so often feel abandoned, and we need only to be reassured that we are not alone..The revolving beacons dwindled, casting off blue-and-red pulses of light that shimmered-swooped through the diffusing fog, as if they were disembodied spirits seeking someone to possess..In a minute or two, one of the cops returned, crouching close as the medics worked. "There's no intruder."

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