

HASTINGS SEEDS PLANTS BULBS SPRING 1946

When together in Agnes's company, Edom and Jacob were brothers, comfortable with each other. But together, just the two, no Agnes, they were more awkward than strangers, because strangers had no shared history to overcome. Jacob had become a card mechanic for one purpose. Not because he'd ever be a gambler. Not to wow friends with card tricks. Not because the challenge intrigued him. He wanted to be able to give Agnes winning cards once in a while, if she was losing too frequently or needed to have her spirits lifted. He didn't feed her winning hands often enough to make her suspicious or to make the games less fun for Edom or Joey. He was judicious. The effort he expended—the thousands of hours of practice—was repaid with interest each time Agnes laughed with delight after being dealt a perfect hand. Among these people was an old man whom they called, among themselves, the Changer. He showed Otter a few spells of illusion; and when the boy was fifteen or so, the old man took him out into the fields by Serrenen to show him the one spell of true change he knew. "First let's see you turn that bush into the seeming of a tree," he said, and promptly Otter did so. Illusion came so easy to the boy that the old man took alarm. Otter had to beg and wheedle him for any further teaching and finally to promise him, swearing on his own true and secret name, that if he learned the Changer's great spell he would never use it but to save a life, his own or another's. "You know," Tom said when the second round of drinks arrived, "hard as it is to believe, some places never heard of martinis." But the boy played no tricks against his father. He took his beatings in silence and learned to hide his gift. When he passed by his own lunch plate on the counter and again saw the quarter gleaming in the cheese, he spat out a curse. "We want the scary one, 'specially if it has spiders, Pixie Lee said squeakily but defiantly. Junior assumed the dead girl had come from a family of stature in the Negro community, which would explain the stonecarver's accelerated service. Vanadium, according to his own words, was a friend of the family; consequently, the father was most likely a police officer. Now that efforts were being made to control the preeclampsia, Dr. Daines had scheduled a series of tests for the following day. He expected to recommend a cesarean section as soon as Phimie's e's blood pressure was reduced and stabilized, but he didn't want to risk this surgery before determining what complications might have resulted from her restricted diet and the compression of her abdomen. 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. JUNIOR CAIN WANDERED among the Philistines, in the gray land of conformity, seeking one-just one-refreshingly repellent canvas, finding only images that welcomed and even charmed, yearning for real art and the vicious emotional whirlpool of despair and disgust that it evoked, finding instead only themes of uplift and images of hope, surrounded by people who seemed to like everything from the paintings to the canapes to the cold January night, people who probably hadn't spent even one day of their lives brooding about the inevitability of nuclear annihilation before the end of this decade, people who smiled too much to be genuine intellectuals, and he felt more alone and threatened than eyeless Samson chained in Gaza. Inexplicably, each repetition of Bartholomew heightened Junior's anxiety. The name resonated not just in his ear, but in his blood and bones, in body and mind, as if he were a great bronze bell and Bartholomew the clapper. Edom carried the honey-raisin pear pie, and Agnes toted Barty across the neatly cropped yard, to the front door. The bell push triggered chimes that played the first ten notes of "That Old Black Magic," which they heard distinctly through the glass in the door. If there had been footsteps, they had fallen silent the moment Junior froze to listen for them. Even over the hard drumming of his heart, he would have heard any noise. The pillowy fog seemed to smother sound in the alleyway more effectively than ever. The dining table could accommodate six, and Agnes instructed Maria to set two places on each of the long sides, leaving the ends unused. "It'll be cozier if we all sit across from one another." Golden lamplight gilded the front windows downstairs. He would sit with Victoria on the living-room sofa, sipping wine as they got to know each other. She might tell him to call her Vicky, and maybe he'd ask her to call him Eenie, the affectionate name Naomi had given him when he wouldn't tolerate Enoch. Soon, they would be necking like two crazy kids. Junior would disrobe her on the sofa, caressing her smooth pliant body, her skin buttery in the lamplight, and then he would carry her, naked, to the dark bedroom upstairs. From time to time, customers had crossed the cocktail lounge to drop folding money into a fishbowl atop the piano, tips for the musician. A few had requested favorite -tunes. Sapphires and emeralds, dazzling gems set in clearest white, ebony pupils at the center. Beautiful mysteries, these eyes, but no different now than they had ever been, as far as she could tell. They sat in silence, and the moment held such an extraordinary quality of expectation that Kathleen would not have been surprised if the vanished quarter had suddenly appeared in midair and dropped, winking brightly, to the center of Nolly's desk, there to spin with perpetual motion, until Vanadium chose to pluck it up. KATHLEEN IN THE candlelight, her ginger eyes a glimmer with images of the amber flame. Icy martinis, extra olives in a shallow white dish. Beyond the tableside window, the legendary bay glimmered, too, darker and colder than Kathleen's eyes, and not a fraction as deep. In the passenger's seat, Barty was cushioned in his mother's arms. At times, the boy cooed or gurgled, or made a wet chording sound. Losen, a sea-pirate who called himself King of the Inmost Sea, was then the chief warlord in the city and all the east and south of Havnor. Exacting tribute from that rich domain, he spent it to increase his soldiery and the fleets he sent out to take slaves and plunder from other lands. As Otters uncle said, he kept the shipwrights busy. They were grateful to have work in a time when men seeking work found only beggary, and rats ran in the courts of Maharion. They did an honest job, Otter's father said, and what the work was used for was none of their concern. To have the best chance of becoming a master mechanic, any young apprentice needs a mentor. The art of total card control cannot be learned entirely from books and experimentation. She hadn't looked up from her sketching. Although Junior thought she hadn't seen him, she'd

apparently been aware of him all along..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..He bought cracker sandwiches, some filled with cheese and some with peanut butter, redskin peanuts, chocolate bars, and Coca-Cola. Although this was an unhealthy meal, cheese and peanut butter and chocolate shared a virtue: they were all binding.. "In cases like this, the malignancy is often more advanced in one eye than the other. If the size of the tumor requires it, we remove the eye containing the greatest malignancy, and we treat the remaining eye with radiation." Junior glanced over his shoulder even as Celestina turned and fled. He caught only a glimpse of her disappearing into the inner hallway..He missed Naomi. She'd always known exactly the right thing to say or do, improving his mood with a few words or with just her touch, when he was feeling down..find reason to celebrate every development in life, including the cruelest catastrophe, by discovering the bright side to even the darkest hour..He tucked his left arm tight against his side and threw himself against the door. The obstructing furniture was heavy, but it moved an inch. If it would give one inch, it would give two, so it wasn't immovable, and he was already as good as in there..And here, now, into the kitchen through a door with a porthole in the center. Into sizzle and clatter, into clouds of fried-onion fumes and the mouthwatering aromas of chicken fat and shoestring potatoes turning golden in deep wells of boiling cooking oil..Junior intended to add one stocky ghost to the party. Perhaps on a summer night in years to come, at the edge of the light fall from his Coleman lantern, a fisherman would see a semitransparent Vanadium providing entertainment with an ethereal quarter.. "Jacob scares people," Agnes said. "No one would eat a pie that Jacob delivered without having it tested at a lab."..This philosophy had worked for him previously, but forgetting the aftermath was more difficult when the aftermath was your own poor, torn, severed toe. Your own poor, torn, severed toe was infinitely more difficult to ignore than a busload of dead nuns..Meanwhile, he became an accomplished meditator. Guided by Bob Chicane, Junior progressed from concentrative meditation with seed the mental image of a bowling pin-to meditation without seed. This advanced form is far more difficult, because nothing is visualized, and the purpose is to concentrate on making the mind utterly blank..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 goblet of flesh and pop it into her mouth..Turning, turning, turning, the mysterious warning in his mind: The spirit of Bartholomew ... will find you ... and mete out the terrible judgment that you deserve..For just one hour, which was not too taxing, he walked in the idea of a world where he had healthy eyes, and shared the vision of other Barty's in other places, so he would be able to see his bride as she walked down the aisle and as, beside him, she took their vows with him, and as she held out her hand to receive the ring..Tom between curiosity and emotional exhaustion, Celestina held his gaze, thinking, and finally she said, "Deal."..He was able to play peekaboo in his fifth month instead of his eighth, stand while holding on to something in his sixth instead of eighth..Snapping the cylinder into place, he rose to his feet. Already he had a new plan, and the cop's revolver was the most important tool that he required to implement it.. "Really, Angel," Barty said with genuine concern, "it might be scary. I got another one we could listen to, if you want."..Lined up on the kitchen table were green-grape-and-apple pies. The thick domed crusts, with their deeply fluted edges, were the coppery gold of precious coins..Requital. Restitutional apology, which must have been learned in a law school where English was the second language. Even atonement..At best, Vanadium might decide Junior had come here to learn what other funeral his nemesis had attended-which was, in fact, the true motivation. But this made it clear that Junior feared him and was striving to stay one step ahead of him. Innocent men didn't go to such length. As far as the fruitcake cop was concerned, Junior might as well have painted I killed Naomi on his forehead..The odds against this phenomenal eleven-card draw must be millions to one, which seemed to give the predictions validity..Angel found this hysterical, and Agnes said long-sufferingly, "Thank you for the language lesson, Master Lampion."..Angel. A less exotic synonym for her own name. Seraphim's angel. The angel of an angel.. "Here we are," said the driver, braking to a stop at the curb in front of the gallery..Shuddering, rubbing furiously at himself, he stumbled into the bathroom. In the mirror, he confronted a face he hardly recognized: swollen, lumpy peppered with red hives..Oblivious that she and Barty had become the center of attention, Angel said, "Does he ever get the quarters back?"..Mrs. Lombardi had no visitors. She was alone in the world, her two children and her husband having passed away long ago.. "I see. Sometimes. Just quick. For like a blink. Like when you stand between two mirrors. You know?"..Unobtrusively, Junior followed the musician across the large front room, but by an indirect arc, using the babbling bourgeoisie for cover..Hunched over his desk, leaning forward conspiratorially, his piggy eyes glittering like those of an ogre discussing his favorite recipe for cooking children, Nolly said, "I've been able to confirm your suspicions..To the growing pile of ruin, she added one of Joey's cardigan sweaters, after popping loose one bone button and almost completely detaching a sewn-on patch pocket. A pair of knockabout khaki pants: quickly clip open the seat seam; cut the corner of the wallet pocket, then rip it with both hands; snip loose some stitching and half detach the cuff on the left leg..Waking from a starry night in the Old West into electric light, gazing up into a blur of faces sans cowboy hats, Agnes felt someone moving a piece of ice in slow circles over her bare abdomen. Shivering as the cold water trickled down her sides, she tried to ask them why they were applying ice when she was already chilled to the bone, but she couldn't find her voice..He said, "There's a whiteness in Barty's right pupil ... which I think indicates a growth. The distortions in his vision are still there, though somewhat different, when he closes his right eye, so that indicates a problem in the left, as well, even though I'm not able to see anything there. Dr. Chan has a full schedule tomorrow, but as a favor to me, he's going to see you before his usual office hours, first thing in the morning. You'll have to start out early."..He reached the end of the alleyway, stumbled into the stream of pedestrians, nearly knocked over an elderly Chinese man, turned, and discovered ... no Vanadium..Taking her mother's advice to heart, Celestina sighed. "All right. Let's just pray they catch him. But if they don't ... two weeks, and then the rest of the plan,

the way you said, Tom. Except that I can't tolerate two weeks-in a hotel, cooped up, afraid to go into the streets, no sun, no fresh air." ready to hear me. However long you need. But something ... something extraordinary happened here before you arrived." "We don't believe it does, do we, Daddy? We don't believe blood tells. We believe we're born to hope, under a mantle of mercy, don't we?" Paul was a dear man, different from Joey in appearance but so like him at heart. She shocked him by insisting they go at once to his house, to his bedroom. Red-faced as no pulp hero ever had been, Paul stammered out that he wasn't expecting intimacy of her so soon, and she assured him that he wasn't going to get it so soon, either. Requests for permission to make copies of any part of the work should be mailed to the following address: "As long as the case was open and you were the sole suspect," said the lawyer, "they couldn't negotiate an out-of-court settlement with you. But they were afraid that if eventually they couldn't prove you killed her, then they'd be in an even worse position when a wrongful death suit finally went before a jury." 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. Squint-eyed, sharp-faced night clerk must not have been the owner, because he wasn't the type to have dreamed up cute spellings for the sign out front. Judging by his appearance and attitude, he was a former Nazi death-camp commandant who fled Brazil one step ahead of the Israeli secret service and was now hiding out in Oregon. 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. So much argued against the idea that they could succeed as a couple. In this age when race supposedly didn't matter anymore, it sometimes seemed to matter more year by year. Age mattered, too, and at fifty, he was twenty-six years older than she was, old enough to be her father, as surely her father would quietly but pointedly--and repeatedly!--observe. He was highly educated, with multiple medical degrees, and she had gone to art school. 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 doors slid open, and they rolled Barty corridor to corridor, past the scrub sinks, to a waiting surgical nurse in green cap, mask, and gown. She alone effected his transfer into the positive pressure of the surgery. Young boys, however, are not moved by scenery, especially not when their hearts are adventuring on Mars. To the window. The warm room sucked cooling fog out of the night, and she leaned across the sill into the streaming mist. Currently, Jacob was far removed from the embalming chamber and intended never to set foot there, alive. With Walter Panglo as his guide, he toured the casket selection in the funeral-planning room. And like John Kennedy's death, Zedd's passing was cloaked in mystery, inspiring widespread suspicion of conspiracy. Only a few believed that he had committed suicide, and Junior was certainly not one of those gullible fools. Caesar Zedd, author of *You Have a Right to Be Happy*, would never have blown his brains out with a shotgun, as the authorities preferred the public to believe. "You sounded as though you were in a lot of distress. You were frightened of this Bartholomew." "Couldn't carry these three ladies," he said. "Svelte as they are, they still weigh more than a backpack." 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 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. Her mother and father still resided in a world where Phimie was alive. Bringing them from that old reality to this new one would be the second-hardest thing Celestina had ever done. "There must be something important I'm supposed to do here that I don't need to do everywhere I am, something I'll do better if I'm blind." The musician had no talent for deception. His hopping-hen eyes pecked at the nearest painting, at other guests, down at the floor, everywhere but directly at Junior, and a nerve twitched in his left cheek. "Well, I'm very good, you know, at faces, they stick with me, I don't know why. Goodness knows, my memory is otherwise shot." Dinner was available in the lounge. Junior enjoyed a superb filet mignon with a split of fine Cabernet Sauvignon. Arriving home, he hesitated to open the door. He expected to find Vanadium inside. After nudging the door shut with his shoulder, Barty carried the sodas out of the kitchen and forward along the hall. Pausing at the livingroom archway, he said, "Uncle Jacob?" "But you don't understand." She recounted the extraordinary draw of aces during the fortune-telling session Friday evening. After his conversation with Magusson, however, Junior realized this fear was irrational. If the detective had miraculously escaped the cold waters of the lake, he would have been in need of emergency medical treatment. He would have staggered or crawled to the county highway in search of help, unaware that Junior had framed him for Victoria's murder, too badly wounded to care about anything but getting medical attention. With the earth still tenuously stable beneath them, they arrived at their fifth destination, a new address on Agnes's mercy list. Holding his precious face between her hands, she kissed him. She met his gaze, and furiously she blinked away her tears, for she wanted to be clear-sighted, to be looking into his eyes, to see him, the truest part of him in there beyond his eyes, until that very last moment when she could not have him anymore. Thrilled by the music but unable to understand a word of the play, he arranged German lessons with a private tutor. The hardest was being in this room at the very moment when Phimie had moved on. Celestina knew beyond doubt that this was the worst thing she would have to endure in all her life, worse than her own death when it came. He paid cash to the locksmith, and included in the payment were the two dimes

and the nickel Vanadium had left on his nightstand..A new quarry, operated by the same company, lay a mile farther north. This was the old one, abandoned after decades of cutting..After carefully wiping her fingers on a paper napkin, Maria examined the garments with interest. She carried her living as the seamstress at Bright Beach Dry Cleaners. At the sight of each rent, popped button, and split seam she clucked her tongue..To the windows, then, drawing all the blinds securely down. And still, irrationally, she felt watched..He was a man of medicine and science, who had been served well by hard logic and by an unwavering commitment to reason. He wasn't prepared easily to accept the notion that logic and reason, while essential tools to anyone hoping to lead a full and happy life, were nevertheless sufficient to describe either the physical world or the human experience..In his blindness, Barty listened to her reports and, through her, saw more than he could have seen if never he had lost his eyes..For eight nights thereafter, Agnes padded the floor with folded blankets on both sides of the boy's bed, insurance against a middle-of-the-night fall. On the eighth morning, she discovered that Barty had returned the blankets to the closet from which she'd gotten them. They were not jammed haphazardly on the shelves-the sure evidence of a child's work-but were folded and stacked as neatly as Agnes herself would have stored them..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..To celebrate, Junior went to a gallery and purchased the second piece of art in his collection. Not sculpture this time: a painting.. "AND I DRINK CHAMPAGNE ALL DAY," said Miss Cheese, pronouncing it "cham-pay-non." "Veal fit for kings," said their waiter, delivering the entrees, and one taste confirmed his promise..Zedd taught in this world where dishonesty is the currency of social acceptance and financial success, you must practice some deceit to get along in life, but you must never lie to yourself, or you are left with no one to trust..In Maria's kitchen, still just four days past Christmas, Agnes let dissolve her stoic mask, and wept at last..A deep storm of silence, anti-thunder, the house fully drenched in a muffling rain of soundlessness..There were effective actions and ineffective actions, socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior, wise and stupid decisions that could be made. But if you wanted to achieve maximum self-realization, you had to understand that any choice you made in life was entirely value neutral. Morality was a primitive concept, useful in earlier stages of societal evolution, perhaps, but without relevance in the modern age..His leonine head and bold features, framed by golden hair, should have conveyed strength, but the impression he might have made was compromised by a fringe of bangs that curled across his forehead, a style unfortunately reminiscent of effete emperors of ancient Rome..Maybe the watch wouldn't be discovered with the corpse. Maybe it would settle into the trash and not be found until archaeologists dug out the landfill two thousand years from now..Then the hero got in the sedan with his friends, and they drove away into the sun-splashed morning..The night was holding its breath again, the previous breeze now pent up in the breast of darkness.. "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."..greatest fright of his life. He jumped inside his skin, and his heart knocked, knocked, and he half expected to hear his bones rattle one against another, like those of a dangling skeleton in a funhouse..the sentences. The substance of what she said and the tone in which she said it were so perfect that it almost seemed as though an angel had relieved her of this burden by possessing her long enough to help her son understand what must happen and why..Maria, after a single sip of Chardonnay, fled to the kitchen, ostensibly to check on the apricot flan that she'd brought, but in reality to press a cool and slightly damp dishtowel against her eyes..As if a door had briefly opened between this windless day and another world, a single gust rattled rain against the windows.. "Mr. Magusson, you once told me that if Detective Vanadium ever bothered me again, you'd have his choke chain yanked. Well, I think you need to talk to someone about that."..Now came a slight but real risk of being heard inside: He pulled the trigger. The flat steel spring in the lock-release gun caused the pick to jump upward, lodging some of the pins at the shear line. The snap of the hammer against the spring and the click of the pick against the pin tumblers were soft sounds, but anyone near the other side of the door would more likely than not hear them; if she was one room removed, however, the noise would not reach her..By nature, she was unable to hold fast to resentment, couldn't nurture a grudge, and was incapable of vengeance. She had forgiven even her father, who had put her through hell for so long, who had blighted the lives of her brothers, and who had killed her mother. Forgiving was not the same as condoning. Forgiving did not mean that you had to exonerate or forget..The rain was colder than it had been earlier, almost as icy as sleet. Or perhaps she was far hotter than before and felt the chill more keenly on her fevered skin. Each droplet seemed to hiss against her face, to sizzle against her hands, with which she tightly gripped her swollen abdomen as if she could deny Death the baby that it had come to collect.. "Forget Barty's tree for a second and imagine that all these many worlds are like stacked slices of Swiss cheese. Through some holes, you can see only the next slice. Through others, you see through two or three or five slices before holes stop overlapping. There are little holes between stacked worlds, too, but they're constantly shifting, changing, second by second. And I can't see them, really, but I have an uncanny feel for them. Watch closely."..When she looked up from Barty, she saw the attorney with his hands full of documents. "Surprise? I know what's in Joey's will."

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