

EPIDEMIA

In the gallery windows, eight of the nine sculptures were so disturbing that many passersby, catching sight of them, blanched and looked away and hurried on. Not everyone can be a connoisseur. He was a patriotic guy, and he preferred American rock to the British brand. He had nothing against the English, no prejudices against people of any nationality. Nevertheless, he believed that the American Top 40 ought to feature American music exclusively. Among themselves, the authorities spoke more often than not in murmurs. Or perhaps Junior was too distracted to hear them clearly. Her hands were locked together in her lap, gripped so tightly for so long that the muscles in her forearms ached. "What's wrong?" Sitting forward in his armchair, Obadiah lowered his hands to his knees, and in thoughtful silence, he stared at them. "It's chilly and foggy and late, and there might be villains afoot at this hour," he intoned with mock gravity. "The two of you are Lipscomb women now, or soon will be, and Lipscomb women never go unescorted through the dangerous urban night." Desperately trying to collect her wits, Agnes gazed out at the deluged graveyard, where the mournful trees and massed monuments were blurred by purling streams ceaselessly spilling down the windshield. and half rotten. She tore it. With the small scissors, she opened the shoulder seam from the inside. Three minutes by car, maybe two without stop signs. He could just about run it as fast as drive it. He had a bit of a gut on him. He wasn't the man he used to be. Ironically, however, after the coma and the rehab, he wasn't as heavy as he had been before Cain sunk him in Quarry Lake. He was about to go in search of the canapes when he half heard one of the guests mention Bartholomew to the reverend's daughter. Only the name rang on his ear, not the words that surrounded it. The doors were unlocked on a pickup parked next to the Pontiac. Junior lifted the granny onto the front seat of the truck. She was so light, so unpleasantly angular, and she rustled so much that she might have been a new species of giant mutant insect that mimicked human appearance. He was glad, after all, that he hadn't killed her: Granny's prickly--bur spirit might have proved to be as difficult to eradicate as a cockroach infestation. With a shudder, he tossed her purse on top of her, and slammed the truck door. He didn't pause to lock the house behind them. Bright Beach, in 1965, was as free of criminals as it was untroubled by lumbering brontosaurus. In a monotone that gave new meaning to deadpan, the detective added: "I'm the only one who was there who doesn't have a dry-cleaning bill." The sidewalks were crowded with businessmen in suits, hippies in flamboyant garb, groups of smartly attired suburban ladies in town to shop, and the usual forgettably dressed rabble, some smiling and some surly and some mumbling but as blank-eyed as mannequins, who might be hired assassins or poets, for all he knew, eccentric millionaires in mufti or carnival geeks who earned their living by biting heads off live chickens. During the girl's final appointment, Junior discovered she would be home alone that same night, her parents at a function she wasn't required to attend. She appeared to reveal this inadvertently, quite innocently; however, Junior was a bloodhound when it came to smelling seduction, regardless of how subtle the scent. "Where did it go?" Grace asked her granddaughter, making as much effort as she could to lighten the mood for the girl's sake. Further preparation--the purchase of gold coins and diamonds, the establishment of false identities--had to be delayed due to the hives. An hour short of dawn, Junior was awakened by a fierce itching not limited to his phantom toe. His entire body, over every plane and into every crevice, prickled and tingled and burned as with fever--and itched. When the waiter had gone, Tom said, "Don't worry about abetting a crime. If I had to pop Cain to prevent him from hurting someone, I wouldn't hesitate. But I'd never act as judge and jury otherwise." He shook so badly that he couldn't remove the cap from the bottle. He was proud to be more sensitive than most people, to be so full of feeling, but sometimes sensitivity was a curse. Frowning, Panglo, said, "Terrible, you're right, so many terrible things happen, but I don't see why trains--". She didn't hear gunfire this time, either, but the hard crack of splintering wood attested to the passage of at least two more bullets. By air from San Francisco south to Orange County Airport, then farther south along the coast by rental car, one week in the wake of Paul Damascus and his three charges, following directions provided by Paul, Tom Vanadium brought Wally Lipscomb to the Lampion house. He prepared his knives and guns. Blades and bullets. Fortune favors the bold, the self-improved, the self-evolved, the focused. "Here we are," said the driver, braking to a stop at the curb in front of the gallery. Among Junior's many gifts, his ability to focus might have been the most important. Bob Chicane, his former instructor in matters meditative, had called him intense and even obsessive, following the painful incident involving meditation without seed, but intensity and obsession were false charges. Junior was simply focused. Phimie gazed upon the child briefly, then sought her sister's eyes again. Another word. Allowing one month for the job might be optimistic. On the other hand, he'd had a long time to perfect a strategy. "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." Because of her occasional bad dreams, Angel chose to sleep now and then in her mother's bed instead of in her own room, and this was one of those nights. Barty paced off the downstairs hallway to the kitchen, thinking about Dr. Jekyll and the hideous Mr. Hyde. Because, since childhood, Jacob had been drawn to stories and images of doom, to catastrophe on both the personal and the planetary scale--from theater fires to all-out nuclear war--he had a flamboyant imagination second to none and a colorful if peculiar intellectual life. For him, therefore, the most difficult part of learning card manipulation had been coping with the tedium of practice, but for years he had applied himself diligently, motivated by his love and admiration for his sister, Agnes. Agnes dropped to one knee before the boy and held him gently by the shoulders. "Let me look." Celestina almost begged off, almost told him that she had no interest in whatever curiosity of medicine or physiology he might have witnessed. The only miracle that would have mattered, Phimie's survival, had not been granted. When Paul arrived with a Christmas gift, Perri was abed, wearing Chinese-red pajamas, reading Jane Austen. A clever contraption of leather straps, pulleys, and

counterweights assisted her in moving her right arm more fluidly than would otherwise have been possible. A lap stand held the book, but she could tam the pages..With the salt and pepper shakers, Tom walked them through the why-I'm-not-sad-about-my-face explanation that he'd given to Angel ten days previously..Junior put the money on the desk. "Then get into the records of Family Services."..Footsteps in the hall drew their attention to the open door, where the surgeon appeared in his loose cotton greens.. "We have reason to believe that the man who raped your sister is stalking you."..The night of Barty's birth, when Joey actually lay dead in the pickup-bashed Pontiac, as a paramedic had rolled Agnes's gurney to the back door of the ambulance, she had seen her husband standing there, untouched by that rain as her son was untouched by this. But Joey-dry-in-the-storm had been a ghost or an illusion fostered by shock and loss of blood.. "Mommy, watch!" He turned in the deluge with his arms held out from his sides. "Not scary!"..When Paul practiced the quarter trick, he usually did so on the sofa or in an armchair, and always in a room with carpeting, because when dropped on a hard surface, the coin rolled and required too much chasing.. "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."..Gorging on fudge cake and coffee to guard against a spontaneous lapse into meditative catatonia, Junior manfully admitted that he had been weak, that he had reacted to the unknown with fear and retreat instead of with bold confrontation. Because each of us can trust no one in this world but himself, self-deceit is dangerous. He liked himself better for this frank admission of weakness..Certain disbelief insulated her against immediate surprise. She shook her head. "That's not possible."..playing cards, Agnes fixated on Deed's blond bangs, which curled across his broad brow.. "When you didn't answer the doorbell, man, I just knew what must have happened," Chicane told Junior..If he had been any other three-year-old, she would have told a compassionate lie. He was her miracle child, however, her prodigy, and he would know a lie for what it was..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..Trembling, she sat beside the bassinet and gazed at her baby with such love that the force of it ought to have rocked him awake..In spite of the urgency of his desire, he followed a circuitous route to Victorial's, doubling back on himself twice, watching for surveillance as he drove. If he were being followed, his tail was an invisible man in a ghost car.. "This is Detective Bellini, with the San Francisco Police Department. Is everything all right there?".. So he calls it the King. If you find him his King, he'll treat you well. He's often here. Come on, I'll show you. Dog can't track till he's had the scent."..The need for relief was tremendous, inexpressible, and the urge to urinate was irresistible, and yet he could not let go. For more than eighteen hours, his natural urinary process had been overridden by concentrative meditation. Now the golden vault was locked tight. Every time that he strained for release, a new and more hideous cramp savaged him. He felt as if Lake Mead filled his distended bladder, while Boulder Dam had been erected in his urethra..The sirens shrieked so loud that he felt a sympathetic vibration in his dental fillings, and with a sharp cry of brakes, a great red truck turned the comer, at once followed by a second..In his seventies but vigorous and full of fun, Sparky liked to take an occasional jaunt to Reno, to pump the slot machines and try a few hands of blackjack. The off-the-record, tax-free monthly checks from Simon were gratefully received, ensuring the old man's cooperation with the conspiracy..He would have done it, too, and risked establishing a pattern that police might notice; but the still, small voice of Zedd guided him now, as so often before, and counseled calm, counseled focus..She got out of the cab and stood on the sidewalk in front of the gallery, her legs as shaky as those of a newborn colt..Glancing at the plump pie in Edom's hands, the gentleman replied to Agnes in a musical yet gravelly voice worthy of Louis Armstrong: "You must be the lady Reverend Collins told me about."..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..He held forth the single red rose. "For you. Not that it compares. No flower could."..The paramedic, fingers pressed to the radial artery in Junior's right wrist, must have felt a rocket-quick acceleration in his pulse rate.. "Ouch," said Edom, and this earned him loving smiles from Maria, Agnes, and Barty..Agnes knew now why this prognostication had dismayed rather charmed her: If you dared to believe in the good fortune predicted he cards, then you were obliged to believe in the bad, as well.. "Well, it's true," he said, finally turning the key in the proper direction and firing up the engine..Nolly shook his head, setting a cotillion of warts and moles adance on his pendulous cheeks. "Ask any adoptee who, as an adult, has tried to team the names of his real parents. Easier to drag a freight train up a mountain by your teeth."..Mechanics have reliably steady hands, yet Jacob's hands shook as he discarded two cards and slowly turned over the ninth draw.. "If I ever have trots, you'll know." And then in the Cheese voice: "CAN WE LISTEN TO THE BOOK TALK IN YOUR ROOM?"..Rena laughed. "Oh, but true! And not just a garden. I'm a field of flowers!" She let go of her skirt, which shimmered like cascades of falling petals. "So tonight will be a famous night, Celestina.".. "Brush your teeth, too," Celestina said, leaning against the jamb in the open doorway..Celestina, the battering Baptist, back in action, came at him again. With one leg broken, another cracked, and the stretcher bar splintered, the chair wasn't as formidable a weapon as it had been. She swung it, Junior dodged, she struck at him again, he juked, and she reeled away from him, gasping..guarantee against self-incrimination, a slap in the face of justice, a violation of the rights of man..Between the one-line description of the baklava and the menu's more effusive words about the walnut mamouls, the suspense became too much, the doubt too insidious, at which point Celestina looked up and said, with more girlish angst in her voice than she had planned "Maybe this isn't the place, maybe it isn't the time, or maybe it's the time but not the place, or the place but not the time, or maybe the time and the place are right but the weather's wrong, I don't know--Oh..Maria arrived early, expecting to assist with final details in the kitchen. Though honored

to be a guest, she wasn't able to stand by with a glass of wine while preparations remained to be made..In a rocking chair, holding her tiny son in her arms, Agnes cried quietly. Often, Barty slept through her weeping. Awakened, he smiled or squinched his face into a puzzled frown..When Victoria failed to answer the door, this man would not simply go away. He had been invited. He was expected. Lights were on in the house. The lack of a response to his knock would be taken as a sign that something was amiss.."Because Cain had called him to get a recommendation of a P. I. here in San Francisco," said Kathleen. "To find out what happened to Seraphim White's baby."..She lived with her parents then. They had converted the dining room to a bedroom for her..This Detroit-built gondola would swiftly navigate the Styx without a black-robed gondolier to pole it onward..Halted by the unmistakable meaning of the expressions on these women's faces, Paul was grateful that Nellie was briefly stricken mute. He didn't believe he had the strength to receive the news that she had tried to deliver..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--".Professing befuddlement, the galerieur led the way through three rooms to the front windows, gliding across the polished maple floors as though he were on wheels..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..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..Barty turned away from her, surveyed the kitchen, and said, "Ah. The twisty is me."..She didn't reach into your thoughts and pluck out the name Rowena. Or Beezil or Feezil'.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..Indeed, the winter storm had dampened neither his hair nor his clothes. The rain appeared to slide away from him a millimeter before contact, as though the water and the man were composed of matter and antimatter that must either repel each other or, on contact, trigger a cataclysmic blast that would shatter the very foundation of the universe..Junior couldn't see the lights of the nearest other houses. Either those structures were screened by trees or the neighbors weren't home..The heavy hand would come down on his shoulder, he would be spun around against his will, and there before him would be those nailhead eyes, the port-wine stain, facial bones crushed by a bludgeon.....Still relishing her little pretense of rejection, Victoria did not touch the rose. "What kind of woman do you think I am?"..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..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..Celestina met them at the front door and flung her arms around Wally. He let go of his cane-Tom caught it-and returned her embrace with such ardor, kissed her so hard, that evidently residual weakness was no longer a problem..The report on the tower forced Junior to consider his mortality; fear, hurt, and self-pity roiled in him. His voice trembled with offense: "You do know, Mr. Magusson, what happened to my Naomi was an..Having been a volunteer instructor of English to twenty adult students over the years, having taught Maria Elena Gonzalez to speak impeccable English without a significant accent, Agnes was little needed as a teacher by her son. Even more than other children, he asked why with numbing regularity, why this and why that, but never the same question twice; and as often as not, he already knew the answer that he sought from her and was only confirming the accuracy of his deduction. He was such an effective autodidact, he schooled himself better than any college of professors that could have been assigned to him.."I haven't disturbed him," said the visitor, taking his cue from the doctor and keeping his voice low..The lid of the cooler wasn't on as tight as it ought to have been. From around one edge slipped a thin and sinuous stream of smoke. Something on fire..With a portion of his profits from Tammy Bean's stock picks, Junior had bought a second painting by Sklent. Titled *In the Baby's Brain Lies the Parasite of Doom, Version 6*, it was so exquisitely repellent that the artist's genius could not be in doubt..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..too quiet and too patient to be the living-dead incarnation of a murdered wife. This was a predatory silence, an animal cunning, not a supernatural hush. This was the elegant stillness of a panther in the brush..He knew the titles that he wanted: "Tunnel in the Sky, Between Planets, Starman Jones. ".Maria, puzzled but cooperative, left the room as instructed, and Barty removed the correct book from the stack on the table, without anyone's guidance. He sat in the armchair at his mother's side and began to read..Thrusting the red rose at her again, insistently pressing it against her hand to distract her, Junior swung the Merlot, and just as Sinatra sang the word sugar with a bounce, the bottle smacked Victoria in the center of her forehead..He had come to believe that every well-rounded, self-improved person ought to have a craft at which he excelled, and

needlepoint appealed to him more than either pottery-making or decoupage. For pottery, he would require a potter's wheel and a cumbersome kiln; and decoupage was too messy, with all the glue and lacquer. By December, he began his first project: a small pillowcase featuring a geometric border surrounding a quote from Caesar Zedd, "Humility is for losers." He swept the immediate area with the flashlight, and shadows spun with shadows, waltzing spirits in the ballroom of the night. Agnes wanted to reach out and touch him, but she found that she didn't have the strength to raise her arm. She was no longer holding her belly, either. Both hands lay at her sides, palms up, and even the simple act of curling her fingers required surprising effort and concentration. 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. Such behavior as hers was unlikely to lead to self-discovery, self-improvement, and fulfillment. We make our own misery in this life. For better or worse, we create our own futures. Her mouth was as greedy as it was ripe, and her pliant body radiated volcanic heat, and as Junior slipped his hands under her skirt, his mind teemed with thoughts of sex and wealth and power, until he discovered that the heiress was an heir, with genitalia better suited to boxer shorts than to silk lingerie. The ball of sodden Kleenex was gripped so tightly in Junior's left hand that had its carbon content been higher, it would have been compacted into a diamond. He saw Vanadium staring at his clenched fist and sharp white knuckles. He tried to ease up on the wad of Kleenex, but he wasn't able to relent. First he tore two paper towels from a wall-mounted dispenser and held one in each hand, as makeshift gloves. He was determined to leave no fingerprints. "After the war, for a while, I was able to get more mainstream work. Racially ... things were changing. But I was getting older, too, and the entertainment business is always looking for someone young, fresh. So I never made it big. Lord, I never even made it medium, but I got along okay. Until ... by the early 1950s, my booking agent found it harder and harder to line up good dates, good clubs." We cherish the old stories for their changelessness. Arthur dreams eternally in Avalon. Bilbo can go "there and back again," and "there" is always the beloved familiar Shire. Don Quixote sets out forever to kill a windmill... So people turn to the realms of fantasy for stability, ancient truths, immutable simplicities. As red as Angel had been for her evening outing, she was that yellow for retirement to bed in her own home. Two-piece yellow jersey pajamas. Yellow socks. At the girl's request, Celestina had tied a soft yellow bow in her mass of springy hair. At the end of the famous sermon, Celestina's father had wished to all well-meaning people that into their lives should fall a rain of benign effects from the kind and selfless actions of countless Bartholomews whom they would never meet. And he assures those who are selfish or envious or lacking in compassion, or who in fact commit acts of great evil, that their deeds will return to them, magnified beyond imagining, for they are at war with the purpose of life. If the spirit of Bartholomew cannot enter their hearts and change them, then it will find them and mete out the terrible judgment they deserve. During the past week, Junior had undertaken quiet background research on the prestidigitator with a badge. The cop was unmarried. He lived alone, so this bold visit entailed no risk. Agnes had read the last half of *Red Planet* to Barty just the previous night, but he brought the book with him, to read it again. As yet, he hadn't taken either an antiemetic or antihistamine to ward off vomiting and hives, because he wanted to medicate -against those conditions as shortly before the violence as was practical, to ensure maximum protection. He'd intended to dose himself only after he followed Celestina home from the gallery and could be reasonably certain that he had located the lair of Bartholomew. In spite of the gloom, the boy's miraculous accomplishment was evident: his clothes and hair were dry as though he'd worn a coat and hood. As though frightened of the gentle certainty in Celestina's eyes, the doctor turned away from her, and toward the window once more. Wednesday, with a swiftness that confirmed its eagerness to make a deal, the state supplied records on the fire tower. For five years, a significant portion of the maintenance funds had been diverted by bureaucrats to other uses. And for three years, the responsible maintenance supervisor filed an annual report on this specific tower, requesting immediate funds for fundamental reconstruction; the third of these documents, submitted eleven months prior to Naomi's fall, was composed in crisis language and stamped urgent. Edom bit his lower lip, shook his head, and stubbornly clung to Barty's left foot. He was, in fact, a first-rate driver, with an impeccable record at the age of thirty: no traffic citations, no accidents. Something was due to happen in this peculiar, extended, almost casual haunting under which he had suffered for more than two years, since finding the quarter in his cheeseburger. While all around him in the streets, people bustled in good cheer, Junior slouched along in a sour mood, temporarily having forgotten to look for the bright side. 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. Friday, December 29, was a grand day: cool but not cold; high scattered clouds ornamenting a Wedgwood-blue sky. The streets were agreeably abustle but not swarming like the corridors of a hive, as sometimes they could be. San Franciscans, reliably a pleasant lot, were still in a holiday mood and, therefore, even quicker to smile and more courteous than usual. "I see. Sometimes. Just quick. For like a blink. Like when you stand between two mirrors. You know?" That was all right, for she had done the same for Otter's elder sister, and so his parents sent him to her in the evenings. But she taught Otter more than the song of the Creation. She knew his gift. She and some men and women like her, people of no fame and some of questionable reputation, had all in some degree that gift; and they shared, in secret, what lore and craft they had. "A gift untaught is a ship unguided," they said to Otter, and they taught him all they knew. It wasn't much, but there were some beginnings of the great arts in it; and though

he felt uneasy at deceiving his parents, he couldn't resist this knowledge, and the kindness and praise of his poor teachers. "It will do you no harm if you never use it for harm," they told him, and that was easy for him to promise them..Celestina stood listening until she heard Wally open the outer door and then close it..Junior suspected Magusson never had any client but himself. Fat fees motivated him, not justice..He groaned. "That just doesn't cut it, Mom. If I gotta be blind, I think I should get to say peed off."

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