

THOSE GIRLS

In the dark woods of the dream, still the presence: faceless and silent, radiating a merciless intent..Striving to appear casual, but obviously unnerved, the pencil-thin man backed off again. "The paintings are lovely, wonderful, I'm enormously impressed. I'm a friend of the artist's, you know. She was a tenant of mine, I was her landlord during her early college years, in her salad days, a nice little studio apartment, before the baby. A lovely girl, I always knew she'd be a success, it was so apparent in even her earliest work. I just had to come tonight, even though a friend's covering two of my four sets. I couldn't miss this." Even at this post midnight hour, the lounge would sometimes be as crowded with worried loved ones as at any other time of the day. This morning, however, the only life under the threat of the scythe appeared to be Wally's; the sole vigil being kept was for him..That every mortal semblance took..In a cabinet above the bench, Junior found a pair of clean, cotton gardening gloves. He tried them on, and they fit well enough..He supposed Victoria might have a visitor. Perhaps a relative or a girlfriend. Not a man. No. She knew who her man was, and she would have no other while she waited for the chance to surrender to him and to consummate the relationship that had begun with the spoon and the ice in the hospital ten days previously.. "Paul," she said, "you've got a lovely house, but Celestina and Grace are doers. They need to keep occupied. They'll go stir-crazy if they don't stay busy. Am I right, ladies?".Of all the kindnesses that we can do for one another, the most precious of all gifts-time-is not ours to give. Bearing this in mind, Agnes did her best to guide her extended family through its grieving for Harrison and for Jacob, into happier days. Respect must be paid, precious memories nurtured, but life also must go on..It didn't seem to him to amount to much. It was such an easy matter to him to make a silvery light shine in a dark room, or find a lost pin by thinking about it, or true up a warped joint by running his hands over the wood and talking to it, that he couldn't see why they made a fuss over such things. But his father raged at him for his "shortcuts," even struck him once on the mouth when he was talking to the work, and insisted that he do his carpentry with tools, in silence..She snatched the handset away from Angel, told Bellini, "He's here," threw the phone on the bed, told Angel, "Stay close to me," ran to the windows, and jerked the drapes out of the way..Barty stood in the rain, surrounded by the rain, pummeled by the rain, with the rain. Saturated grass squished under his sneakers. The droplets, in their millions, didn't bend-slip-twist magically around his form, didn't hiss into steam a millimeter from his skin. Yet he remained as dry as baby Moses floating on the river in a mother-made ark of bulrushes..Tom himself had decided to build a new life here, as well, assisting Agnes with her ever-expanding work. He was not yet sure whether this would include the rededication to his vows and a return to the Roman collar, or whether he would spend the rest of his days in civvies. He was delaying that decision until the Cain case was resolved..A floor-to-ceiling bookshelf was crammed with pulp magazines that had been published throughout the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, before paperback books supplanted them. The All-Story, Mammoth Adventure, Nickel Western, The Black Mask, Detective Fiction Weekly, Spicy Mystery, Weird Tales, Amazing Stories, Astounding Stories, The Shadow, Doc Savage, G-8 and His Battle Aces, Mysterious Wu FangDrawn one after the other, two knaves of spades didn't signify two deadly enemies, but meant that the enemy already predicted by the first would be unusually powerful, exceptionally dangerous.. "You should be with your children," Agnes worried. Maria looked up. "My babies are sitted with my sister." When Frieda finished retching and passed out in a heap, Junior left her on the floor and immediately set out to explore her rooms..He was glad that he'd taken the double dose of antiemetics. In spite of this provocation, his stomach felt as solid and secure as a bank vault..Junior knew that he must remain vigilant. Vigilant and focused until January 12 had come and gone. Eight days to go..Tuesday, January 9, having cashed out a number of investments during the past ten days, Junior made a wire transfer of one and a half million dollars to the Gammoner account in the Grand Cayman bank.. "You look as if you've seen a ghost," said Vinnie, and Agnes wished the threat were as simple as a restless spirit, groaning and rattling its chains, like Dickens's Marley come to Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve..Junior shuddered. Vanadium hadn't invented the name. It had genuine if inexplicable resonance with Junior that had nothing to do with the detective.. "Thank you, Dr. Lipscomb. I'll keep track of what you're losing every month, and someday I'll pay it back to you." Junior felt a little lightheaded. He felt strange. He hoped he wasn't coming down with the flu..His waitress was a cutie. She flirted with him, and he knew he could have her if he wanted.. "Yeah, but I've been thinking about that. If he feels some kind of responsibility ... then why did he ever represent Cain in the first place?". In abject misery, Junior lay waiting to go under the knife, more eager to be cut than he would have thought possible only a few hours before. The mere promise of this surgery thrilled him more than all the sex that he'd ever enjoyed between the age of thirteen and the Thursday just past..A sudden cold breeze blew down out of the moon, bearing a faint alien scent, and the black boughs of the trees billowed and rustled like witches' skirts..In truth, he was terrified. Although his need for her company was so profound that it seemed to arise from his marrow, a part of him marveled-and trembled-at his dedicated pursuit of her..To the right first. Kick the door open, simultaneously firing two rounds, because maybe this was her bedroom, where she kept a gun. Mirrors shattered: a tintinnabulation of falling glass on porcelain, glass on ceramic tile, a lot more noise than the shots themselves..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.. "New York City, March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire-one hundred forty-six dead." Having shuffled all four stacks of cards, Jacob cut two decks and shuffled the halves together, controlling them exactly as he had controlled them on Friday evening. Then the other two halves..When Agnes turned her head and saw Maria Elena Gonzalez, she thought she must be dreaming again..Shortly after four o'clock, here was Neddy, already spiffed for work in black tuxedo, pleated white shirt, and black bow tie, with a red bud rose as a boutonniere, standing just inside the open door to Celestina

White's studio apartment, holding forth in tedious detail as to the reasons why she was in flagrant breach of her lease and obligated to move by the end of the month. The issue was Angel, lone baby in an otherwise childless building: her crying (though she rarely cried), her noisy play (though Angel wasn't yet strong enough to shake a rattle), and the potential she represented for damage to the premises (though she was not yet able to get out of a bassinet on her own, let alone go at the plaster with a ball-peen hammer)..Nevertheless, being cautious even as he seized the day--or the night, in this case--he parked a short distance from his destination, on a parallel street. He walked the last three blocks.. "I'm a healer, not a prosecutor. I'm not in the habit of making accusations, especially not against my own patients." Tom caused less of a stir in the restaurant than Kathleen had expected. Other diners noticed him, of course, but after one or two looks of shock or pity, they appeared indifferent, though this was undoubtedly the thinnest pretense of indifference. The same quality in him that elicited deferential regard from the waiter apparently ensured that others would be courteous enough to respect his privacy..Piano music drifted into the restaurant from the adjacent bar, so soft and yet sprightly that it made the clink of silverware seem like music, too..While Angel continued her relentless interrogation of Paul Damascus, Tom joined her mother in front of the large window at the end of the room farthest from the dinner table..The word need, instead of want, moved Paul to follow the doctor across the coffee shop..If Cain had been attracted to one woman by her looks, surely he would be attracted to the other. And perhaps the sisters shared a quality other than beauty that drew Cain with even greater power. Innocence, perhaps, or goodness: both foods for a demon..Junior was pleasantly surprised by his flexibility and by his audacity. He was, indeed, a new man, a daring adventurer, and by the day he grew more formidable..The weather was good, so he went for a walk, though he crossed the street repeatedly to avoid passing newspaper-vending machines.. "December 1, 1958, in Chicago, Illinois, a parochial-school fire killed ninety-five."..After two years of rehabilitation, Tom had been pronounced as fit as ever, a miracle of modern medicine and willpower. But right now he seemed to have been put back together with spit and string and Scotch tape. Arms pumping, legs stretching, he felt every one of those eight months of coma in his withered-and-rebuilt muscles, in his calcium depleted-and-rebuilt bones.. "Those were Rowena's affectionate names for the boys when they were babies. Her private nonsense names for them, because she said they were like two beautiful little elves and ought to have elfin names."..Edom had turned away from the box of groceries that he was packing. Frowning at the pies, he said, "You don't think. . . .During the day and then following a dinner break, the Hackachaks persisted. The hospital had never witnessed such a spectacle. Shifts changed, and new nurses came to attend to Junior in greater numbers than necessary, using any excuse to get a glimpse of the freak show.." "There's a valuable lesson in that," Agnes said. "Others can learn from it if you care to share. But if you want to record your life only up to the card cheating, that's okay, too. Even that far, it's a fascinating journey, a story that shouldn't be lost with you when you pass on. Libraries are packed with biographies of movie stars and politicians' most of them not capable of as much meaningful self-analysis as you'd get from a toad. We don't need to know more about celebrities' lives, Obadiah. What might help us, what might even save us, is knowing more about the lives of real people who've never made it even medium but who know where they came from and why."..Leaning across the front seat, he lowered the passenger's window six inches. Then he lowered the driver's-side window an equal distance.."I was twenty-three. At St. Anselmo's I was the prefect of one dormitory floor. The floor on which all the murders occurred. After that ... I decided maybe I could better protect the innocent if I were a cop. For a while, the law gave me more to hold on to than faith did."..He still had work to do here. Properly disposing of Thomas Vanadium, however, was the most urgent piece of business..The reverend made the first toast, speaking so softly that his tremulous words seemed to bloom in Celestina's mind and heart rather than to fall upon her ears. "To gentle Phimie, who is with God."..On one wall hung an impressive array of gardening tools. In the corner was a potting bench..FOR AMERICANS OF Chinese descent--and San Francisco has a large Chinese population--1965 was the Year of the Snake. For Junior Cain, it was the Year of the Gun, though it didn't start out that way.."WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE MY BOYFRIEND?" asked Miss Velveeta, who had thus far shown no romantic inclinations..Done with dolls for now, Barty and Angel went upstairs to his room, where the book that talked waited patiently in silence. With her colored pencils and a large pad of drawing paper, she clambered onto the cushioned window seat. Barty sat up in bed and switched on the tape player that stood on the nightstand..He swore that he would throw away all memory of this incident, as well. In Caesar Zedd's best-selling *How to Deny the Power of the Past*, the author offers a series of techniques for expunging forever all recollection of those events that cause us psychological damage, pain, or even merely embarrassment. Junior went to bed with his precious copy of this book and a snifter of cognac filled almost to the brim..The sign promised topless dancers. Although Junior had been in San Francisco for over a week, he had not yet sampled this avant-garde art form.."Does my dad like Christmas?" Barty asked, sitting on the grave grass in front of the headstone.."Anyway, something clicked in me on the roller coaster, and I grasped a new angle of approach to the problem. I've figured out that I can walk in the idea of sight, sort of sharing the vision of another me, in another reality, without actually going there." He smiled into her astonishment. "So what do you say about that?"..Chicane packed the ice against Junior's thighs. "Severe spasm causes inflammation. Twenty minutes of ice alternating with twenty minutes of massage, until the worst passes."..Bill wasn't impressed. "They build houses out of mud in China. No wonder everything falls down."..Neither hesitantly nor recklessly, the boy set off across the lawn toward the porch steps. He maintained a far straighter line than Agnes would have been able to keep with her eyes closed..As always, curious about how others lived--or, in this case, bad lived--Junior explored the house, poking in drawers and closets. For a widower, Bartholomew Prosser was neat and well-organized..Maybe every accidental death was suspicious to Vanadium. His obsessive hounding of Junior might be his standard operating procedure..At last: the humiliating backless gown, the precious drugs, even a pretty nurse who seemed to

like him, and then oblivion. Otter hesitated and said, "Yes." Could any spell of magic make, "Hasn't the sheriff's department already reached a determination of accidental death?" Parkhurst asked. "They're good men, good cops, every last one of them," said Vanadium, "and if they've got more pity in them than I do, that's a virtue, not a shortcoming. What could Mr. Cain have taken to make himself vomit?" He knew she wouldn't just step back to calculate her batting average, so he rolled at once, out of her way, immensely relieved that he could move, because judging by the pain coruscating across his back, he wouldn't have been surprised if she had broken his spine and paralyzed him. The chair crashed down again, exactly where Junior had been sprawled an instant before. She was not yet twenty-one, and he was at least twice her age, but he leaned like a small child against her, and like a mother she comforted him. The sound-suppressor didn't render the pistol entirely silent, but the three soft reports, each like a quiet cough muffled by a hand, wouldn't have carried beyond the hallway. Interminably against the ignition plate before, at last, he was able to insert it. "Should be a boy, because then you'll always have a man around the house." "And, listen, if you leave too soon behind me, I've got a guy watching, and he'll put a hollow-point thirty-eight in your ass." "Cash," Junior said. "I'll pay cash, with whatever amount of deposit is required." On the serving tables, the canapés? trays held only stained paper doilies, crumbs, and empty plastic champagne glasses. When he closed his eyes, he saw a bowling pin, a leftover image from his with-seed days. In less than a minute, he was able to make the pin dematerialize, filling his mind with featureless, soundless, soothing, white nothingness. Having been an object of Thomas Vanadium's fixation, Junior felt fortunate to have survived. He shuddered. Tongue clamped between his teeth as he concentrated on keeping the blue crayon within the lines of the bunny, Barty nodded. "Yeah. If Vanadium appeared among these men, Junior would not only puke out the contents of his stomach, but also would disgorge his internal organs, every last one of them, and spew up his bones, too, until he emptied out everything within his skin. Celestina was maneuvered aside as the surgical team began resuscitation procedures. Stunned, she backed away from the table until she encountered a wall. In southern California, as dawn of this new momentous day looms. When the convulsive seizure passed, as he collapsed back on the spattered pillow, shuddering at the stench rising from his hideously fouled clothes, Junior was suddenly struck by an idea that was either. But on March 23, 1966, after a bad date with Frieda Bliss, who collected paintings by Jack Lientery, an important new artist, Junior had an experience that rocked him, added significance to the episode in the diner, and made him wish he hadn't donated his pistol to the police project that melted guns into switchblades. "When we pull away, people are waving across the street at the UPS truck, and the driver, he sees them, and he stands there, kind of confused, and then he waves back." "Take care you don't beat evil into him," said his aunt. "One of the things I was searching for in your house was a life insurance policy on your wife. I didn't find one. Didn't find any canceled checks for the premium, either." A speeding truck passed, stirring the fog, and the white broth churned past the car windows, a disorienting swirl. Among those present before the caravan returned were a few who should have known better than to allow this madness. Tom Vanadium, Edom, Maria. They stared up at the boy, tense and solemn, and Agnes could only suppose that they, too, had arrived after the fact, with the boy already beyond easy recall. "All right," Agnes said, and as she voiced her acceptance, she was shivered by a sudden fear for which she couldn't at once identify a cause. 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. As shaken as she had been at Phimie's side, she couldn't trust her memory. Perhaps she hadn't seen what she thought she'd seen. Kaitlin had the piercing voice and talent for vituperation that marked her as a member of the Hackachak tribe, but for now she was content to leave the vocal assault to her parents. The stare with which she drilled Junior, however, if brought to bear on a promising geological formation, would core the earth and strike oil in minutes. Having ridden from the church to the cemetery with Hanna, his housekeeper, Paul chose to walk home. The distance between Perri's new bed and her old was only three miles, and the afternoon mild. Celestina White was the center of attention, always surrounded by champagne-swilling, canapé--gobbling bourgeoisie who would have been shopping for paintings on velvet if they'd had less money. He did not look at the battered face. Dare to meet those shuttered eyes, and they might spring open, full of blood and fix him with a crucifying stare. 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--". The various flavors of canned soda were always racked in the same order, allowing Barty to select what he wanted without error. He got orange for Angel, root beer for himself, and closed the refrigerator. "Love you," Wally said, and Celestina repeated it, and he said, "I'm gonna stand in the hall till I hear you set both locks." He followed an alleyway to the building's service entrance, for which he possessed a key that wasn't provided to other tenants. He unlocked the steel door and stepped into a small, dimly lighted receiving room with gray walls and a speckled blue linoleum floor. Junior was free of superstition. He believed in neither gods nor demons, nor in anything between. Sobbing desperately, he dropped the telephone handset on the secretary, seized the dishtowel. He wrapped the cloth tightly around the shattered stump, applying pressure to diminish the bleeding. She struggled, wept, pretended disgust, faked shame, swore to bring the police down on him. Another man, not as highly skilled at reading men as Junior, might have thought the girl's resistance was genuine, Sat her charges of rape were sincere. Any other man might have backed off, but Junior was neither fooled nor confused. With a cry of alarm, he bolted to the bathroom and made it with not a second to spare. He seemed to be on the throne long enough to have witnessed the rise and fall of an empire. He did wonder why he had chosen this night of all nights to become even a more fearless adventurer, rather than a month ago or a month hence. Instinct told him that he'd felt the need to test himself, that a crisis was fast approaching, and that to be ready for it, he must be confident that he could do what had to be done when the crunch came.

Slipping into sleep, Junior suspected that Prosser might have been less lark than preparation..He left the party and stood in the street for a while, taking slow deep breaths, letting the brisk night air clean the pot smoke out of his lungs, slow deep breaths, suddenly sober in spite of the beer he'd drunk, slow deep breaths, as chilled as a slab of beef in a meat locker, but not because of the cold night..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..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..Nolly, Kathleen, and Sparky had prepared him for Industrial Woman, but when the flashlight beam flared off her fork-and-fan-blade face, Vanadium twitched in fright. Without fully realizing what he was doing, he crossed himself.. "Soon as Cain is out of sight, we yank up our tricky vending machines, then haul the real ones out of the van and bolt 'em down again. Slick, fast. People are still picking up quarters when we finish. And get this-they want to know where the camera is." Only a small group of mourners gathered for this service. Junior and Naomi had been so intensely involved with each other that, unlike many young married couples, they had made few friends..His instructor, Bob Chicane-who visited twice a week for an hour-advised him to imagine a perfect fruit as the object of his meditation. An apple, a grape, an orange, whatever..Clutching the red rose in his left hand, the brightly wrapped gift box half crushed in his right, Thomas Vanadium lay at Junior's mercy, with no tricks to perform, no quarter to set dancing across his knuckles,.This trick, however, was far more difficult than walking where the rain wasn't. Sustaining vision took both a mental and physical toll from him.. "It's an uncommon reaction," the physician acknowledged, "but not so uncommon as to be rare." "I'm not sure which is more unusual-the site of the eruption, the number of boils, or the size of them." Her awful sense of weightlessness became something much better: buoyancy, an exhilarating lightness of spirit. Fear remained with her-fear for Barty, fear of the future and of the strange complexity of Creation that she'd just glimpsed-but wonder and wild hope now tempered it..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." "What room has Mrs. Lombardi been moved to?" she asked. "I'd like to ... to see her before I go." When Agnes woke at 1:50 A.M., she was in the grip of a vague apprehension for which she couldn't identify a source..Eventually he found himself alone at the large viewing window of the neonatal-care unit. Seven newborns were in residence. Fixed to the foot of each of the seven bassinets was a placard on which was printed the name of the baby..She slept for a while, waking to a prayer spoken softly but fervently in Spanish..Great hobnailed wheels of pain turned through Agnes, driving her into darkness for a moment.. "I got to admit," Nolly said, "I'm surprised these little pranks have rattled him so deeply." Tom Vanadium was no alarmist, and the most logical explanation came to him first. Paul had wanted to learn how to roll a quarter across his knuckles, and in spite of being dexterously challenged, he practiced hopefully from time to time. No doubt, he had sat at the table this morning--or even last evening, before bed-dropping the coin repeatedly, until he exhausted his patience..Worse, the vengeful and vicious bitch-or bastard, whatever-evidently had made up vile stories about him, which on a slow evening she'd shared with Neddy, with the bartender, with anyone who would listen. The staff of the lounge believed Junior was a dangerous sadist, No doubt she had concocted other lurid stories, as well, charging him with everything from a degenerate interest in bodily wastes to the selfmutilation of his genitalia..So Barty and Tom just happened to be chatting about a quantum physicist they had seen on a television program, a documentary about the uncanny resonance between the belief in a created universe and some recent discoveries in quantum mechanics and molecular biology. The physicist claimed that a handful of his colleagues, though by no means the majority, believed that with a deepening understanding of the quantum level of reality, there would in time be a surprising rapprochement between science and faith..As Junior paced the hotel room, his fear made way for anger. All he wanted was peace, a chance to grow as a person, an opportunity to improve himself And now this. The unfairness, the injustice, galled him. He seethed with a sense of persecution..After using a paring knife to section and core an apple, Paul withdrew a sheet of stationery from his desk and uncapped a fountain pen. His penmanship was old-fashioned -in its neatness, as precise and appealing as fine calligraphy. He wrote: Dear Reverend WhiteHe opened the solid doors on the bottom of the breakfront, did not find what he was looking for, checked in the sideboard next, and there it was, a small liquor supply. Scotch, gin, vodka. He selected a full bottle of vodka.

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