

THREE LAYERS AND A BRASSIERE

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his third month, instead of at the end of his fifth, he was combining vowels and consonants: "ba-ba-ba, ga-ga-ga, la-la-la, ca-ca-ca." At home, Agnes had no appetite, but she fixed Barty a cheese sandwich, spooned potato salad into a dish, added a bag of corn chips and a Coke, and served this late dinner on a tray, in his room, where he was already in bed and reading Tunnel in the Sky..A SEVERE THIRST INDICATED to Agnes that she wasn't dead. There would be no thirst in paradise..He nodded. "The effect not only comes before a cause in this case, but completely without a cause. The effect is staying dry in the rain, but the cause-supposedly walking in a dryer world-never occurs. Only the idea of it." Barty, at the head of the table, sensed Mary's approach only as she was about to touch him. She put a hand on his arm and said, "Daddy, will you turn your chair away from the table and let me sit on your lap?". Oregon State Police might find at least one reason to be suspicious of the tragic scenario that he was creating. He didn't know much about the technology that police might employ at a crime scene, and he knew even less about forensic pathology. He was just doing the best job he could..She asked him how many fingers she was holding up, and he said four, and four it was. Then two fingers. Then seven. Her hands so pale, the palms both bruised..This comment left Tom nonplussed. He could only imagine that Jacob had known someone who died in that crash-yet the twin's tone of voice and his expression seemed to suggest that a world without the Bakersfield train wreck would be a less convivial place than one that included it.. "And maybe," said Agnes, caught up in the speculation, "when your life comes to an end in all those many branches, what you're finally judged on is the shape and the beauty of the tree." He had met her in a university adult-extension course titled "Increasing Self-Esteem Through Controlled Screaming." Participants were taught to identify harmful repressed emotions and dissipate them through the authentic vocal imitations of a variety of animals..Not a door opened in the narrow street. Nobody looked out to see what the noise was. Not till long after the men were gone did some neighbors creep out to comfort Otter's people as best they could. "Oh, it's a curse, a curse, this wizardry!" they said..Until Nolly, Kathleen's life had been as short on romance as a saltless saltine is short on flavor. Her childhood and even her adolescence were so colorless that she'd settled on dentistry as a career because it seemed, by comparison to what she knew, to be an exotic and exciting profession. She'd dated a few men, but all were boring and none was kind. Ballroom-dancing lessons-and ultimately competitions-promised the romance that dentistry and dating hadn't provided, but even dancing was somewhat a disappointment until her instructor introduced Kathleen to this balding, bull-necked, lumpy, utterly wonderful Romeo.. "Money's no object. I can afford whatever you'd like to charge. And I'd be a diligent student." She loosened her hair and brushed it out, and Nolly took her to dinner at their favorite place, which had the decor of a classy saloon and a bay view suitable for God's table. They came here often enough that the maitre d' greeted them by name, as did their waiter..On this momentous day, however, drawing provided no solace. Frequently, her hands shook, and she could not control the pencil..Earlier, after sprinting down the fire road, he had been breathing hard when he reached his Chevy, and by the time that he'd raced to Spruce Hills, the nearest town, he had spiraled down into this strange condition. His driving became so erratic that a black-and-white had tried to pull him over, but by then he was a block from a hospital, and he didn't stop until he got there, taking the entry drive too sharply, jolting across the curb, nearly slamming into a parked car, sliding to a stop in a no-parking zone at the emergency entrance, lurching like a drunkard as he got out of the Chevy, screaming at the cop to get an ambulance..Reminding himself that fortune favored the persistent and that he must always look for the bright side, Junior began with the city itself and with those whose surnames were Bartholomew. This was a manageable number..Later, at home in bed, after Nolly proved the value of oysters, he and Kathleen lay holding hands. Following a companionable silence, he said, "It's a mystery." April 23, 1940, Natchez, Mississippi, dance-hall fire-one hundred ninety-eight dead. December 7, 1946, Atlanta, Georgia, the Winecoff Hotel fire-one hundred nineteen dead..ONWARD THROUGH THIS Monday, January 17, this momentous day, when the ending of one thing is the beginning of another..Looking down at Barty, Agnes saw the ghost of Joey in the baby's face, and although she half believed that her husband would be alive now if he had never tempted fate by putting such a high price on his life, she couldn't find any anger in her heart for him. She must accept this final generosity with grace-if also without enthusiasm..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..On the third of June, he found another useless Bartholomew, and on Saturday, the twenty-fifth, two deeply disturbing events occurred. He switched on his kitchen radio only to discover that "Paperback Writer," yet another Beatles song, had climbed to the top of the charts, and he received a call from a woman..Neither guilt nor remorse plagued him. Good and bad, right and wrong, were not issues to him. Actions were either effective or ineffective, wise or stupid, but they were all value neutral..Judging by the sounds Vanadium made, Junior figured that the cop had settled once more into the armchair.. "He was born yesterday, not today," Edom said glumly. "When the thousand-year quake hits, skyscrapers will pancake, bridges crumble, dams break. In three minutes, a million people will die between San Diego and Santa Barbara." Of course, Angel might have been playing around with the talking book. Or, even though she'd left the dolls downstairs, she might have been filling the time until Barty's return by having a nice chat with Miss Pixie and Miss Velveeta. She had other voices, too, for other dolls, and one for a sock puppet named Smelly..a time, from the carafe on the nightstand. She spooned the ice into Junior's mouth not with the businesslike..Neither of them was aware that their personal drama, in all its clumsiness and glory, had focused the attention of everyone in the restaurant. The cheer that went up at Celestina's acceptance of his proposal caused her to start, knocking the ring from Wally's hand as he attempted to slip it on her finger. The ring bounced across the table, they both grabbed for it, Wally made the catch, and this time she was properly betrothed, to wild applause and laughter.. "I'm paying," Celestina insisted when they were seated. "I'm now a successful artist, with untold numbers of critics just waiting to savage me." "Stop it, stop it!" Agnes, only ten years old, slender and shaking, but wild with righteousness, until now held in thrall by her own fear, by the memory of all the beatings that she herself has taken. She screams at their father and strikes him with a book she's brought from the house. The Bible. She strikes their father with the Bible, from which he's read to them every night of their lives. He drops the roses, tears the holy book out of Agnes's hands, and pitches it across the yard. He rakes up a handful of the scattered roses, intending to make his son resume this dinner of sin, but here comes Agnes once more, the Bible recovered, brandishing it at him, and now she says what all of them know to be true but what none of them has ever dared say, what even Agnes herself will never again dare to say after this day, not while the old man lives, but she dares to say it now, holding the Bible toward him, so he can see the gold-embossed cross upon the imitation-leather cover. "Murderer," Agnes says. "Murderer." And Edom knows that they're all as good as dead now, that their father will slaughter them right here, right this minute, in his rage. "Murderer," she says accusingly, behind the shield of the

Bible, and she doesn't mean that he is killing Edom, but that he killed their mother, that they heard him in the night, three years before, heard the short but awful struggle, and know that what happened was no accident. Roses fall from his skinned and pierced hands, a flurry of petals yellow and petals red. He rises and takes a step toward Agnes, his dripping fists crimson with his blood and with Edom's. Agnes doesn't back away, but thrusts the book toward him, and scintillant sunlight caresses the cross. Instead of tearing the book out of her hands again, their father stalks away, into the house, surely to return with club or cleaver ... yet they will see no more of him this day. Then Agnes-with tweezers for the thorns, with a basin full of warm water and a washcloth, with iodine and Neosporin and bandages-kneels beside him in the yard. Jacob, too, comes forth from the dark crawlspace under the porch, having watched in terror from behind the latticework skirt. He is shaking, crying, flushed with embarrassment because he didn't intervene, although he was wise to hide, for the disciplinary beating of one twin usually leads to the pointless beating of the other. Agnes gradually settles Jacob by involving him in the treatment of his brother's wounds, and to Edom she says, often thereafter, "I love your roses, Edom. I love your roses. God loves your roses, Edom." Overhead, agitated wings quiet to a soft flutter, and the shrieking crows grow silent. The air pools as still and heavy as the water in a hidden lagoon within a secret glade, in the perfect garden of the unfallen....."-though this Tom now has a rhinoceros-smacked face, this other Tom, in his own world, has an ordinary face. Poor him, so ordinary."Having anticipated a problem of one kind or another, Junior withdrew a packet of crisp new hundred-dollar bills from an inside jacket pocket. The bank band still wrapped the stack, and on it was printed \$10,000."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."But what made you choose that life? You must have committed to the seminary awfully young."She looked surprised, all right, but her expression wasn't the one that Junior had painted on the canvas of his imagination. Her surprise had no delight in it, and she didn't at once break into a radiant smile..madness or a brilliant deductive insight: Naomi, the hateful bitch, she poisoned me!.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..The opening paragraph still lingered in his memory, because he had crafted it with great care: Greetings on this momentous day. I'm writing to you about an exceptional woman, Agnes Lampion, whose life you have touched without knowing, and whose story may interest you.."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."Instinct, even reason, told him that some connection existed between this person, this Bartholomew, and Celestina. The name had terrified Cain in a bad dream, the very night of the day that he'd killed Naomi, and Vanadium therefore had incorporated it into his psychological-warfare strategy without knowing its significance to his suspect. As strongly as he sensed the connection, he couldn't find the link. He lacked some crucial bit of information..As woe begone a widower as anyone could expect, Junior spent every night home alone. By Sunday, he'd slept without companionship eight nights since being discharged from the hospital..Celestina hadn't noticed the infant being taken away. She had wanted to see it once more, even though she was sickened by the sight of it..She slammed it shut before he could stop her, whether he had intended to stop her or not, and she engaged the deadbolt lock..The tone sounded, as promised, and a man's voice spoke from the box: "It's Max. You're psychic. I found the hospital here. Poor kid had a cerebral hemorrhage, arising from a hypensive crisis caused by ... eclampsia, I think it is. Baby survived. Call me, huh?".Using the brochure as an ice-breaker, Junior circulated through the throng, seeking anyone who'd attended the.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 FangIn the sermon that brought him a moment of fame that he'd found more uncomfortable than not, Daddy had used the life of Bartholomew to illustrate his point that every day in every life is of the most profound importance. Bartholomew is arguably the most obscure of the twelve disciples. Some would say Lebbeaus is less known, some might even point to Thomas the doubter. But Bartholomew certainly casts a shadow far shorter than those of Peter, Matthew, James, John, and Philip. Daddy's purpose in proclaiming Bartholomew the most obscure of the twelve was then to imagine in vivid detail how that apostle's actions, seemingly of little consequence at the time, had resonated down through history, through hundreds of millions of lives-and then to assert that the life of each chambermaid listening to this sermon, the life of each car mechanic, each teacher, each truck driver, each waitress, each doctor, each janitor, was as important as the resonant life of Bartholomew, although each dwelt beyond the lamp of fame and labored without the applause of multitudes..Reflections of those tracks appeared as stigmatic tears on the long face of the physician..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.."Does my dad like Christmas?" Barty asked, sitting on the grave grass in front of the headstone..She bit her lower lip, held her breath, repressed the sob that sought release, and said, "I know."These kids were the same age, yet listening to them was akin to hearing Angel do her charming shtick with an adult who had a lot of patience, a sense of humor, and an awareness of generational ironies..obsessed with humanity's sorry penchant for destroying itself either by intention or ineptitude--491 suffocated and burned alive on an evening meant for champagne and revelry..Immediately at the thought of regurgitation, his abdominal muscles contracted like those of a laboratory frog zapped by an electric current, and he choked on a rising horror..proud," she said, smiling as she quoted one of their father's most familiar sermons, "nor powerful-".As the heavysset nurse retreated with the baby, Phimie's grip on her sister's hand relaxed, but then grew firm once more as her gaze also became more intense. "Love ... you."But she knew. Barty, buoyant as ever, seemed not to be much worried about the problem with his vision. He appeared to expect that it would pass like any sneezing fit or cold..Captivated by catastrophe, so lost in his book that he might as well have stepped magically inside of it and closed the covers after himself, Uncle Jacob didn't answer..In the front wall of the living room, where once had been a fine bay window, the parsonage lay open to the sunny day. Tom shrubbery, carried in from outside, marked the path of destruction. In the very middle of the room, plowed against a toppled sofa and a thick drift of broken furniture, a battered red Pontiac sagged to the left on broken springs and blown tires. A portion of the crazed windshield quivered and collapsed inward, while plumes of steam hissed from under the buckled hood..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." The porch light wasn't on. No landscape lighting brightened the backyard. Barty was a gray shadow moving through darkness and through the darkling drizzle. Celestina nodded, unable to respond to the aide's kindness. Sometimes kindness can shatter as easily as soothe. She dealt with them equally, too, favoring neither-except in the matter of pie delivery. On those rare occasions when she could not make these rounds herself and when she had no one to turn to but a brother, Agnes always asked for Edom's help. One of the coin seekers knocked against Junior, jarring him loose of his paralysis, but when he stumbled out of the line of fire of the second vending machine, a third machine shot quarters at him. If the nun and the nurse could know the loathing that Celestina had felt earlier, they would never allow her here in the creche, never trust her with this newborn. At the front, a soft spotlight focused on the life-size crucifix. The only additional illumination came from the small bulbs over the stations of the cross, along both side walls, and from the flickering flames in the ruby glass containers on the votive-candle rack. They came to the house in Boatwright Street after dark. They kicked the door in, and Hound, standing among the armed and armored men, said, "Him. Let the others be." And to Otter he said, "Don't move," in a low, amicable voice. He sensed great power in the young man, enough that he was a little afraid of him. But Otter's distress was too great and his training too slight for him to think of using magic to free himself or stop the men's brutality. He flung himself at them and fought them like an animal till they knocked him on the head. They broke Otter's father's jaw and beat his aunt and mother senseless to teach them not to bring up crafty men. Then they carried Otter away. 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. Heart racing, Tom produced another quarter from a pants pocket. For the benefit of the adults, he performed the proper preparation-a little patter and the ten-finger flimflam-because in magic as in jewelry, every diamond must have the proper setting if it's to glitter impressively. "Tame him or bury him," said Losen, and turned to more important matters. As was true of the entire house, the bedroom was immaculate. The wood floor gleamed as though polished by hand. A simple white chenille spread conformed to the bed as smoothly and tautly as the top blanket tucked around a soldier's barracks bunk. He would come. She knew. She had always known, but had half forgotten. There was something special about Angel, and because of that specialness, she lived under a threat as surely as the newborns of Bethlehem under King Herod's death decree. Long ago, Celestina glimpsed a complex and mysterious pattern in this, and to the eye of the artist, the symmetry of the design required that the father would sooner or later come. Nolly shuddered. "The wilds of Oregon. I don't intend ever to go there until it's civilized." Renee Vivi spoke with a silken southern accent. Vivacious without being cloyingly coquettish, well-educated and well-read but never pretentious, direct in her conversation without seeming either bold or opinionated, she was charming company. The symptoms that terrified Phimie-the headache, crippling abdominal pain, dizziness, vision problems-had entirely relented. Possibly they had been more psychological than physical in nature. Fortunately, just as he was about to declare his gut feelings to his superior and risk dismissal, he saw his potential patient. At fifteen, Seraphim was breathtakingly beautiful, in her own way as striking as Naomi, and instinct told Junior that the chance of being physically or morally polluted by her was negligible. 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." Friday, January 14, eight days after Joey's death, Agnes closed the sofa bed, intending to sleep upstairs from now on. And for the first time, since coming home, she cooked dinner without resort to friends'. 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. Even above the piston-knock of her heart and the bellows-wheeze of her breath, Celestina heard wood crack, a small pane of glass explode, and metal torque with a squeal. The creep was going to get away. The minister had finished. The service was over. No one came to Junior with condolences, because they would see him again shortly, at the Ford dealership buffet. "He's blind, sure, but he's also a boy," Angel said, "and trees are something that boys gotta do." And so at the age of thirty-one, after more than twenty-eight years of blindness with a few short reprieves, Barty Lampion received the gift of sight from his ten-year-old daughter. 1996 through 2000: Day after day, the work was done in memory of Agnes Lampion, Joey Lampion, Harrison White, Seraphim White, Jacob Isaacson, Simon Magusson, Tom Vanadium, Grace White, and most recently Wally Lipscomb, in memory of all those who had given so much and, though perhaps still alive in other places, were gone from here. Throughout the day, he tried not to think about the four knaves. But he was an obsessive, of course, so in spite of all his trying, he did not succeed. The strand was inclined toward the lake. He closed the door and got out of the way as the Studebaker rolled forward, gathering speed. 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. Knacker or Hisscus, or Nork, was talking about an offering, as though Naomi were a goddess to whom they wished to present a penance of gold and jewels.

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