

PIERRE OR THE AMBIGUITIES

Judging by Grace's expression when Paul plucked the chest off the floor, he figured it was heavy. He had no way of knowing for sure, because he was in a weird state, so saturated with adrenaline that his heart squirted blood through his arteries at a speed Zeus couldn't have matched with the fastest lightning bolts in his quiver. The chest felt no heavier than a pillow, which couldn't be right, even if it was empty..He moved from a crib to a bed of his own, with guardrails, months ahead of the average toddler. Within a week, he requested that the rails be left down..He decided to use the tool just three times on each deadbolt before trying the door. The less noise the better. Maybe luck would be with him..Two high-quality deadbolt locks. Sufficient protection against the average intruder, but inadequate to keep out a self-improved man with channeled anger..Two staff members were at the front desk, when last he'd seen them, out of sight now and too far away to hear the crooning. Junior had been waiting at the doors when the library opened, and thus far he'd encountered no other patrons..EVERY MOTHER BELIEVES that her baby is breathtakingly beautiful. She will remain unshakably convinced of this even if she lives to be a centenarian and her child has been harrowed by eight hard decades of gravity and experience..Yet he brooded even at breakfast, in spite of the consolation of clotted cream and berries, raisin scones and cinnamon butter. In better worlds, wiser Tom Vanadiums chose different tactics that resulted in less misery than this, in a far swifter conveyance of Enoch Cain to the halls of justice. But he was none of those Tom Vanadiums. He was only this Tom, flawed "land struggling, and he couldn't take comfort in the fact that elsewhere he had proved to be a better man..Nevertheless, he stepped away from the wall, and with his hands extended to full arm's length, he turned, feeling the lightless world around him. Nothing. No one..In the first drawer, he discovered an address book. Logically, Vanadium would have taken this with him, even if on the lam from a murder rap, so Junior tucked it in his jacket pocket..get his hackles up if we, at the state level, still want to poke around a little..His mother, gently pushing Tom to the prime view point at the head of the stairs, seemed unconcerned about her child's venture into the storm..In answer, Wally came running with his heavy medical bag, as he was vow doctor to some people on the pie route. "The weather's a lot better than I expected, so I went back to change into lighter clothes."..If killing the wrong Bartholomew had broken a dam in Junior and released a lake of tension, whacking the right Bartholomew would set loose an ocean of pent-up stress, and he would feel free as he'd not felt since the fire tower. Freer than he'd been in his entire life.. "You remember things?" the girl asked, her fingertips still pressed lightly to his cheek.. "I'll teach her," Wally said, moving past them to the apartment door, fishing a ring of keys out of his coat pocket..The infant's smile was so captivating and his puzzlement so comically earnest that both expressions worked on Agnes's misery as surely as yeast leavens dough. Her bitter tears turned sweet..The bandaged man stormed up from the ruin of the living room, gauze fluttering around his lips as his hard exhalations seemed to prove that he wasn't a long-dead pharaoh reanimated to punish some heedless archaeologist who had ignored all warnings and violated his tomb. So this wasn't a Weir Tales moment..Antihypertensive drugs were administered intravenously, and Phimie was confined to bed, attached to a heart monitor..PZ7.L52I5 Tal 2001 [Fic]-dc21 2001016554..In fact, though he strained hard to recall their conversations, he could dredge up nothing that Seraphim had said during therapy, as if he'd been stone-deaf in those days. The only things he retained were sensual impressions: the beauty of her face, the texture of her skin, the firmness of her flesh under his ministering hands..After the stupid bastards read a newspaper or smoked a few cigarettes, they finally broke down the door. Satisfyingly dramatic: the crack of splintering wood, the crash..The street in front of the gallery was as flooded by a sea of fog as the alleyway at the back. The headlights of passing traffic probed the gloom like beams from deep-salvage submersibles at work on the ocean floor..By the time he ordered cr?me brulee for dessert, he was able to laugh at himself. Had he expected to see a ghost enjoying a cocktail and free cashews at the bar?.Celestina didn't hear gunfire, but she couldn't mistake the bullets for anything else when they cracked through the door..With great deliberation, Joey shifted gears and followed the drive way to the street, where he peered left and then right with the squint-eyed suspicion of a Marine commando scouting dangerous territory. He turned right..Testing Celestina's nerves as fully as Barty had tested his mother's, Angel pulled-levered -shinnied-swung herself so fast up through the tree, arriving at the boy's side while red streaks still enlivened a sky that was repainting itself purple. She stood in the crook of limbs with him, and her delighted laughter rang down through the cathedral oak. 1975 through 1978: Hare ran from Dragon, Snake fled from Horse, and '78 bounced to the beat, because disco ruled. The reborn Bee Gees dominated the airwaves. John Travolta had the look. Rhodesian rebels, grasping the dangers inherent in any battle between equals, had the manful courage to slaughter unarmed women missionaries and schoolgirls. Spinks won the title from Ali, and Ali won it back from Spinks..Cypresses lined the entry drive to the cemetery. Tall and solemn, the trees kept guard, as though posted to prevent restless spirits from roaming out into the land of the living..Aware of the dangers of dehydration, he drank a bottle of water and put two half-gallon containers of Gatorade in the Suburban..He usually ate lunch alone in his office. The room was the size of an elevator, but of course didn't go up or down. It went sideways, however, in the sense that herein Paul was transported into wondrous lands of adventure..They introduced themselves as Knacker, Hisscus, and Nork, but Junior didn't bother to associate names with faces, partly because the men were so alike in appearance and manner that their own mothers might have had difficulty figuring out which of them to blame for never calling. Besides, he was still tired from his recent ramble through the hospital-and unnerved by the thought of some baleful-eyed Bartholomew prowling the world in search of him..She wasn't listening closely to him. Numb. She felt as though she were half anesthetized. She was looking past him, at nothing, and his Voice seemed to be coming to her through several layers of surgical masks, though he now wore none at all..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 Junior was not discreet, and if gossip about the widower Cain and the sexy nurse began to circulate, Vanadium would be on the case again even if it had been closed. The cop was sick, hateful, driven by unknowable inner demons. Although he might for the moment have been reined in by those in higher office, mere gossip of a spicy nature would be excuse enough for him to open the file again, which he'd surely do without informing his superiors. Shadows still perched throughout most of the room. They no longer reminded her of roosting birds, but of a featherless flock, leathery of wing and red of eye, with a taste for unspeakable feasts. Besides, he wasn't on the Greenbaum Gallery customer list and didn't have an invitation. No inquiring voice echoed off the passage walls, no accusatory shout. He was alone with the cadaver in this mist-shrouded moment of the metropolitan night-but perhaps not for long. He was Father Tom again, having recommitted to his vows three years previous. At his request, the Church had assigned him as the chaplain of Pie Lady Services. White as a Viking winter, these magnificent choppers, and as straight as the kernel rows in the corn on Odin's high table. Superb occlusal surfaces. Exquisite incisor ledges. Bicuspids of textbook formation nestled in perfect alignment between molars and canines. The magazine covers were colorful, lurid, full of violence and eeriness and the coy sexual suggestiveness of a more innocent time. Most days, he read a story while eating the two pieces of fruit that were his lunch, but sometimes he lost himself in a particularly vivid illustration, daydreaming about far places and great adventures. As the storm failed to dampen Joey, so the rotating red-and-white beacons on the surrounding police vehicles did not touch him. 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. "Do you want me to call and confirm how Vanadium was harassing you up here?" asked Magusson. Gazing into the mirror, which ought to have been clouded with self-pity as though with steam, Junior Cain searched for his anger and found it. This was a black and bitter anger, as poisonous as rattlesnake venom; with little difficulty, his heart was distilling it into purest rage. AS THE WULFSTAN PARTY was being seated at a window table, slowly tumbling masses of cottony fog rolled across the black water, as if the bay had awakened and, rising from its bed, had tossed off great mounds of sheets and blankets. The words of Robert Louis Stevenson, well read, poured another time and place into the room as smoothly as lemonade pouring from pitcher into glass. Wait here in the car. Give them time to settle down. At this hour, they would put the kid to bed first. Then Ichabod and Celestina would go to their room, undress for the night. be entombed in one of those memorial walls, well above ground level, where nothing was likely to seep into them. OF THE SEVEN NEWBORNS, none was fussing, too fresh to the world to realize how much was here to fear. 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 stabbed Prosser, however, merely to relieve his frustration and to enliven the dull routine of a life made dreary by the tedious Bartholomew hunt and by loveless sex. In return for more excitement, he'd assumed greater risk, to mitigate risk, he must have insurance. He had been surprised to learn her age. She didn't appear to be that old. Thirty or not, Victoria was unusually attractive. "From time to time now, you're going to be written about," Helen warned. "Be prepared for a peevish critic or two, furious about your optimism." Otter shook his head. Switching on the lights as he went, Junior sought the source of the serenade. He carried the 9-mm pistol, which would have been useless against a spirit visitor; but his extensive reading about ghosts hadn't convinced him that they were real. His faith in the effectiveness of bullets and pewter candlesticks, for that matter-remained undiminished. "He must've listened on the car radio," Agnes said, digging down into the layered days in her packed trunk of memories. "He was trying to get ahead of his work, so he'd be able to stay around the house a lot during the week after the baby came. So he arranged to meet with some prospective clients even on Sunday. He was working a lot, and I was trying to deliver my pies and meet my other obligations before the big day. We didn't have as much time together as usual, and even as impressed as he must've been with the sermon, he never had a chance to tell me about it. The next-to-last thing he ever said to me was 'Bartholomew.' He wanted me to name the baby Bartholomew." He wasn't afflicted with parenthood envy. A baby was the last thing he would ever want, aside from cancer. Children were nasty little beasts. A child would be an encumbrance, a burden, not a blessing. When Agnes crunched the ice, the nurse said, "No, no. Don't swallow it all at once. Let it melt." 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. In a red coat with a red hood, Bartholomew appeared first in the arms of the tall lanky man, the Ichabod Crane look-alike, who also had a large tote bag hanging from his shoulder. He had considered tracking down Celestina-and the bastard boy--prior to her exhibition. The alumni office of her college might be one route to her. And further inquiries in the city's fine-arts community would no doubt eventually provide him with her address. By the first of November, they moved his mother's bed into the living room, so she could be in the center of things, where always she had been, though they admitted no guests now, only members of their family with its many names. Junior was disturbed that the mysterious chanteuse had been performing when he wasn't home. He felt violated. Invaded. Since he knew where Celestina would be on January 12, there was no point in taking risks to find her sooner. He had plenty of time to prepare for their encounter, time to savor the sweet anticipation. They had not come to Junior yesterday in their grief, if in fact they had thought to grieve. This morning, Damascus had left the house early, before Vanadium came downstairs, which was perfect for Junior's purposes. While the maniac cop was finishing his shave and shower, Junior crept upstairs to check his room. He discovered the revolver in the second of the three places that he expected it to be, did his work, and returned the weapon to the nightstand drawer in precisely the position that he had found it. Narrowly avoiding

an encounter with Vanadium in the hall, he retreated to the ground floor. After some fussing over the most effective placement, he left the quarter and the luggage—just as Vanadium, the human stump, clumped down the stairs. Junior experienced an unexpected delay when the detective spent half an hour making phone calls from the study, but then Vanadium went into the kitchen, allowing him to slip out of the house and complete his work. Like a spring-loaded novelty snake erupting from a can, Junior exploded up from the chair, nearly knocking it over. "Besides, I still live by my vows as much as possible, though I've had the longest continuing dispensation on record." A smile on that cracked countenance could be touching, but an ironic look now worked less well; it gave Kathleen a chill. "Vanity is a sin I've more easily been able to avoid than some others." were uniformly negative, frequently hilarious, but never as succinct and violent as Sklent's. He couldn't easily refuse the assignment. Later that year, President Lyndon Johnson, with strong backing from both the Democratic and the Republican Parties, was expected to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and currently it was dangerous for clearheaded believers in the primacy of self to express their healthy instincts, which might be mistakenly perceived as racial prejudice. He could be fired. And God has four hundred billion billion fingers, and He plays a really hot version of "Hawaiian Holiday." Now, if Victoria reported to Vanadium that Junior had shown up at her door with a red rose and a bottle of Merlot and with romance on his mind, the demented detective would be on his ass again for sure. Vanadium might think that the nurse had misinterpreted the business with the ice spoon, but the intent in this instance would be unmistakable, and the crusading cop—the holy fool—would never give up. "I thought there was a burglar," Junior groaned, but he knew better than to spit out his entire story at once, for then he would appear to be reciting a script. Cain's Spruce Hills home, which he'd shared with Naomi, hadn't been furnished anything like this. The difference between there and here—and the similarity to Vanadium's digs—could be explained neither by wealth alone nor by a change of taste arising from the experience of city life. 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. Simon Magusson, lacking family, had left his estate to Tom. This came as a surprise. The sum was so considerable that even though Tom was on a dispensation from his vows, which included his vow of property, he was uncomfortable with his fortune. His comfort was quickly restored by contributing the entire inheritance to Pie Lady Services. They had been brought together by two extraordinary children, by the conviction that Barty and Angel were part of some design of enormous consequence. But more often than not, God weaves patterns that become perceptible to us only over long periods of time, if at all. After the past three eventful years, there were now no weekly miracles, no signs in the earth or sky, no revelations from burning bushes or from more mundane forms of communication. Neither Barty nor Angel revealed any new astonishing talents, and in fact they were as ordinary as any two young prodigies can be, except that he was blind and she served as his eyes upon the world. One of the gifts of power is to know power. Wizard knows wizard, unless the concealment is very skillful. And the boy had no skills at all except in boat-building, of which he was a promising scholar by the age of twelve. About that time the midwife who had helped his mother at his birth came by and said to his parents, "Let Otter come to me in the evenings after work. He should learn the songs and be prepared for his naming day." "Jacob scares people," Agnes said. "No one would eat a pie that Jacob delivered without having it tested at a lab." Instead of opening his left fist, Tom lifted his martini with his right, and on the tablecloth under the glass lay the coin. Sliding one hand lightly along the railing, the boy quickly descended the short flight of steps and walked onto the soggy lawn, into the rain. Nurses were supposed to be angels of mercy. She had shown him no mercy. And she was certainly no angel. But with the silencer attached, the pistol was useful only for close-up work. After passing through a sound-suppressor, the bullet would exit the muzzle at a lower than usual velocity, perhaps with an added wobble, and accuracy would drop drastically at a distance. A new quarry, operated by the same company, lay a mile farther north. This was the old one, abandoned after decades of cutting. "The mass of these malignancies suggest they will soon spread—or have already spread—out of the eye to the orbit. There is no hope that radiation therapy will work in this instance, and no time to risk trying it even if there were hope. No time at all. No time. Dr. Schurr and I agree, to save Bartholomew's life, we must remove both eyes immediately." Apparently, he didn't lean back far enough, because amazingly he landed on his feet in the winter-faded grass. The shock buckled him, and he dropped to his knees. Still cradling Grace, he lowered her to the ground as gently as he'd ever lowered fragile Perri onto her bed—quite as if he had planned it this way. Paul checked the back of the Suburban, since he fancied himself the wagonmaster. He wanted to be sure that the goods were loaded in such a way that they were unlikely to slide or be damaged. "Packed tight. Looks just fine," he declared, and closed the tailgate door. Head lowered, as if his visit to Jacob were a weight that bowed him, his attention was on the ground. Otherwise, he might not have noticed, might not have been halted by, the intricate and beautiful pattern of sunlight and shadow over which he walked. 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. Lord, listen to me—but I've really got to know if you can, if you are, how you feel, whether you feel, I mean, whether you think you could feel—. Eventually he put the quarter on the nightstand, switched off the lamp, and slipped into bed. If he woke, however, and saw her sitting vigil, Barty would understand how terrible his condition might be. He already had the pistol he had taken from Frieda Bliss's collection, but it didn't come with a sound-suppressor. He was preparing for all contingencies. Focus. When you construct or reconstruct a world that never existed, a wholly fictional history, the research is of a somewhat different order, but the basic impulse and techniques are much the same. You look at what happens and try to see why it happens, you listen to what the people there tell you and watch what they do, you think about it seriously, and you try to tell it honestly, so that the story will have weight and make sense. Wednesday morning,

January 10, he wired one and a half million dollars from the Gammoner account to Pinchbeck in Switzerland. Then he closed out the account in the Grand Cayman bank. "Be quiet, sugarpie," she said, crossing the bedroom to the door, which stood only slightly ajar. Although she already knew that the answer could not be cheerily optimistic, Celestina wondered, "Is the baby likely to be . . . normal?" -nor cruel, nor hateful, nor envious, nor mean," Phimie recited, "for all these are sicknesses of this fallen world." Abruptly, without a cannonade of thunder, without artillery strikes of lightning, the storm broke. As loud as marching armies, rain tramped across the roof. Junior lifted the pattie with a fork, found no quarter under it, and put the meat on one half of the bun. He constructed the sandwich from these fixings, added ketchup and mustard, and took a great, delicious, satisfying bite. Those words, in a vertiginous spiral, spooled through the memory tapes in Junior's mind, as clear and powerfully affecting-and every bit as alarming-as the memory flash of the ordeal in the Dumpster. He couldn't recall where he'd heard them, who had spoken them, but revelation trembled tantalizingly along the rim of his mind. Shortly after six o'clock, Saturday morning, she stirred from a fretful dream and saw Barty sitting up in bed, reading. Phimie's eyes widened, her hand tightened painfully on her sister's hand, her entire body convulsed, thrashed, and she cried, "Unnn, unnn, unnn!" Hard experience had taught him, however, that killing someone he knew, while occasionally necessary, didn't release stress. Or if it did briefly release stress, then unforeseen consequences always contributed to even worse future stress. Because his lacrimal glands and tear ducts were intact, Barty could cry with his plastic eyes. Consequently, it didn't seem all that much more incredible to be seeing with them. face looked familiar, and he sensed that he had seen it before in a disquieting context, although the man's identity eluded him. 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. By the time he reached the airport, located a private-charter company, chased up the owner through the night-security man, and arranged to be flown at once to Eugene, Oregon, aboard a twin-engine Cessna, the points of pain in his face had begun to throb. And speak the tongues of man and drake. Her strength was the strength of stones only in the sense that she felt as immovable as rock, yet she found the resources to raise one arm, to place her left hand over Maria's bead-tangled fingers. "But the baby's dead." A few attractive women were here alone, proof that social mores had changed dramatically in three years. Junior was aware of their hot gazes, their need, and he knew that he could have any of them. "You did just fine, Tom, just fine," Agnes said in a consoling tone that she might have used with a boy whose performance, at a piano recital, had been earnest but undistinguished. "We were all quite impressed." The poor girl's blood pressure soared in spite of the medication. She suffered a violent seizure. In the crisis, the rack holding her oxygen bottle had been rolled to the bed. The breathing mask lay on the pillow beside her. Celestina was hardly more than a child herself, pretending to have the strong shoulders and the breadth of experience to bear this burden. She felt half crushed. At 3:31 A.M., even the early-winter dawn wasn't near, yet Junior was too awake to return to bed. Though sweet, though melancholy, never ominous, the ghostly singing had left him feeling ... threatened. He considered taking a shower and getting an early start on the day. But he kept remembering Psycho: Anthony Perkins dressed in women's clothes and wielding a butcher knife. Celestina threw down the weapon even before she turned, and as two cops entered the room, she cried, "He's getting away!" He stashed two suitcases full of clothes and toiletries-plus the contents of Pinchbeck's safe-deposit box-in the van, and then added those precious items that he'd be loath to lose if the hit on Bartholomew went wrong, forcing him to leave his Russian Hill life and flee arrest. The works of Caesar Zedd. Sklent's three brilliant paintings. The needlepoint pillows, to which he'd colorfully applied the wisdom of Zedd, constituted the bulk of this collection of bare essentials: 102 pillows in numerous shapes and sizes, which he had completed in just thirteen months of feverish stitchery. After a surgeon had lanced fifty-four boils and cut the cores from the thirty-one most intractable (shaving the patient's head to get at the twelve that were festering on his scalp), and after three days of hospitalization to guard against staphylococcus infection, and after he had been turned back into the world as bald as Daddy Warbucks and with the promise of permanent scarring, Junior visited the Reno library to catch up with current events. "Will do. Check out those paintings he collects. People pay real money for them, even people who've never been in a looney bin." In his mind's eye, Junior saw the coin in transit of the blunt fingers, moving more swiftly than previously because its passage was lubricated by blood. As outgoing as his twin uncles were introverted, Barty didn't withdraw from the festivities. Agnes never needed to remind him that family and guests took precedence over even the most fascinating characters in fiction, and the boy's delight in the company of others pleased his mother and made her proud. The apartment had been furnished with only two padded folding chairs and a bare mattress in the living room. The mattress was on the floor, without benefit of a bed frame or box springs. As he passed the living-room archway, he said, "Watch out for tidal waves, Uncle Jacob." "Please take the cards from the pack and put them on the coffee table in front of you," Obadiah directed. Vanadium's smile, in that tragically fractured face, might have alarmed most people, but Kathleen found it appealing because of the indestructible spirit it revealed. She told him to stay on the line, stay on no matter what, told him to keep talking to her, and he hung up. He didn't allow himself to ponder why Vanadium had come here or what relationship might have existed between the cop and Victoria. All that was for later consideration, after he had dealt with this unholy mess. Never would he pause to reload at this desperate penultimate moment, when success or failure might be decided in mere seconds. That would be the choice of a man who thought first and acted later, the behavior of a born loser. "64 just a little bit ago," the girl said. "I was sitting on the porch, having a Popsicle, and I just figured it out." Paul didn't realize that Grace had followed them into the living room until she screamed. She started to push past him, heading toward her husband even as Harrison went down. "Ordinarily, I'd recommend that you apply hot compresses every two hours to relieve discomfort and to hasten drainage, and I'd send you home with a prescription for an antibiotic." "There's no clear evidence of birth defects, but a couple tests reveal some worrisome

anomalies. We'll know when we see the child." "The piece that's intrigued me," Junior revealed, "is the one that's rather like a c-c-candlestick. It's quite different from the others." His precious wife had fallen from the tower and died only hours before this girl was born. This girl ... this vessel. Fragments of the broken wineglass crunched under his shoes as he crossed the small kitchen to the dinette. He opened the bottle of vodka and put it on the table in front of the dead woman. Once, he had been a superb driver. For the past decade, his performance behind the wheel depended on his mood. Dr. Lipscomb brought his hands to his face, covering his nose and mouth as earlier they had been covered with a surgical mask, as though he were in danger of drawing in, with his breath, an idea that would forever change him.

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