

THRILLING TALES OF AMERICAN PIONEERS

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among the compromises has already become ready. In the execution, he was likewise scrupulous, for he didn't want the grownups to see what Angel saw; he preferred they believe it was sleight of hand-or magic. After the usual moves, he briefly closed his right hand around the coin, then with a snap of his wrist, flung it at Angel, simultaneously distracting with flourishes aplenty.. "If they always go there, smooosh--smooosh, then you're going to wind up with one really fat finger." *.Using all his powers of concentration, which were formidable, Junior sought to silence the phantom Chicane. At first, the voice steadily faded, but soon it grew louder again, and more insistent.. Agnes got out of bed, switched on the lamp, and tucked Barty in once more. "Say your silent prayers." This is, of course, the purpose of art: to disturb you, to leave you uneasy with yourself and wary of the world, to undermine your sense of reality in order to make you reconsider all that you think you know. The finest art should shatter you emotionally, devastate you intellectually, leave you physically ill, and fill you with loathing for those cultural traditions that bind us and weigh us down and drown us in a sea of conformity. Junior had learned this much, already, from his art appreciation course.. An elderly Negro gentleman answered the door. His hair was such a pure white that in contrast to his plum-dark skin, it appeared to glow like a nimbus around his head. With his equally radiant goatee, his kindly features, and his compelling black eyes, he seemed to have stepped out of a movie about a jazz musician who, having died, was on earth once more as someone's angelic guardian.. As Edom crossed the threshold, moving outside to the landing at the top of the stairs, Jacob followed, proselytizing for his faith: "Christmas Eve, 1940, St. Anselmo's Orphanage, San Francisco. Josef Krepp killed eleven boys, ages six through eleven, murdering them in their sleep and cutting a different trophy from each--an eye here, a tongue there." Then Junior saw the blood on the right cuff of Vanadium's shirt. Blood dripping from his hand, too.. Easter still lay a few weeks away, but already Celestina had begun decorating more than a hundred baskets, so that nothing would need to be done at the last minute except add the candy. Her living room was a warren of baskets, ribbons, bows, beads, bangles, shredded cellophane in green and purple and yellow and pink, and decorative little plush-toy bunnies and baby chicks.. A dumpster and a dead musician had humbled him as thoroughly as he had ever been humbled before, as completely as violent nervous emesis and volcanic diarrhea had humbled him, and he had no tolerance for being humbled. Humility is for losers.. "I'm not sure which is more unusual--the site of the eruption, the number of boils, or the size of them." In the glamorous cocktail lounge of this elegant hotel, Junior was necessarily forced to use other of Zedd's techniques--and more brandy--to liberate from his subconscious the name of the caller on the Ansaphone. Max. The caller had said, It's Max.. When Agnes and Paul returned from a honeymoon in Carmel, they discovered that Edom had finally cleared out Jacob's apartment. He donated his twin's extensive files and books to a university library that was building a collection to satisfy a growing professorial and student interest in apocalyptic studies and paranoid philosophy.. She continued: "When we don't allow ourselves to hope, we don't allow ourselves to have purpose. Without purpose, without meaning, life is dark. We've no light within, and we're just living to die." "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." "Angel," Phimie said urgently, and then, with an effort that made a blood vessel swell. "Really? You really think that?" he asked in his flat voice, which he sometimes wished were more musical, but which he knew lent a sober conviction to anything he said. "You think something so delicious could come from a fat, smelly, dirty, snorting old pig?" terrified, the thorns pricking so close to his eyes, green points combing his lashes. He's too weak to resist, disabled. The paramedic snatched the oxygen feed from his patient's nose and quickly elevated his head, providing a purge towel to catch the thin ejecta.. The diminutive mortician spoke a few comforting words instead of commenting on the dental history of the deceased, and when he put a consoling hand on Jacob's shoulder, Jacob cringed from his touch.. On one wall hung an impressive array of gardening tools. In the corner was a potting bench.. She wanted to tell him not to say these queer things, not to talk this way, yet she couldn't speak those words. When Barty asked her why, as inevitably he would, she'd have to say she was worried that something might be terribly wrong with him, but she couldn't express this fear to her boy, not ever. He was the lintel of her heart, the keystone of her soul, and if he failed because of her lack of confidence in him, she herself would collapse into ruin.. force open Edom's mouth. "Eat your sin, boy, eat your sin!" Edom resists eating his sin, but he's afraid for his eyes.. "Please try not to be alarmed, Miss White, but I have a patrol car on the way to your address." Everything was proceeding precisely as Junior had envisioned in the instant when Naomi had first discovered the rotten section of railing and had nearly fallen without assistance. The entire plan had come to him, wholly formed, in a blink, and during the following two circuits of the observation deck, he had mulled it over, seeking flaws but finding none.. Most likely, Reverend White's ramblings were as greasy with sentiment and oily with irrational optimism as were his daughter's paintings, so Junior was in no hurry to learn the name of the radio program or to write for a transcript of the sermon.. As he rose from his chair, Barty began to reacquaint himself with the feeling of all the ways things are, began to bend his mind around the loops and rolls and tucks of reality that he had perceived on the roller coaster that day, and by the time he had followed Angel and Tom to the bottom of the stairs and into the oak-shaded yard behind the house, the day faded into view for him.. He swallowed one capsule and washed it down with water. He returned the pharmacy bottle to the nightstand.. Neither customers nor staff could be found in the first of the three large rooms. Only cheaper galleries were crowded with browsers and unctuous sales personnel. In an establishment as upscale as Coquin, the hoi polloi were discouraged from gawking, while the high value and extreme desirability of the art were made evident by the staff's almost pathological aversion to promoting the merchandise.. support as he had only pretended to need it previously. He felt as if he had become the mere shell of a man and that the right note would shatter him as a properly piercing tone can shatter crystal.. We have inhabited both the actual and the imaginary realms for a long time. But we don't live in either place the way our parents or ancestors did. Enchantment alters with age, and with the age.. On Thursday, December 28, employing forged driver's licenses and social-security cards as identification, Junior opened small savings accounts and also rented safe-deposit boxes for Pinchbeck and Gammoner at different banks with which he'd never previously done business, using the mailing addresses that he'd established earlier.. He slipped behind the door and raised the pewter candlestick over his head. Weighing perhaps five pounds, the object made a formidable bludgeon, almost as good as a hammer.. A sedan had come to a stop in the graveled driveway, over to the right of the house, almost out of view. As Junior watched, the headlights were doused. The engine shut off. The driver's door opened. A man got out of the car, a shadowy figure in the fearsome yellow moonlight. The dinner guest.. Another pocket. More cartridges. Trying to squeeze just two into the magazine, but his hands shaking and slippery with sweat.. "A nose, now, is a useful thing, a salable thing," Hound went on. "Not that I'm looking for competition. But a finder can always find work, as they say... You ever been in a mine?" Griskin, a former convict, had served eleven years for second-degree murder before

the lobbying efforts of a coalition of artists and writers had won his parole. He possessed a huge talent. No one before Griskin had ever managed to express this degree of violence and rage in the medium of bronze, and Junior had long kept the artist's work on his short list of desired acquisitions. Wally drove slowly, carefully, with all the responsibility that you would expect from an obstetrician, pediatrician, and spanking-new fiancé. The trip home to Pacific Heights took twice as long as it would have taken in clear weather on a night without a pledge of truth. He let go of the girl's chin, and at once she scrunched into the corner of the window seat, as far away from him as she could get. The knowing look in her eye wasn't that of an ordinary child, not that of a child at all. Not his imagination, either. Terror, yes, but also defiance, and this knowing expression, as though she could see right through him, knew things about him that she had no way of knowing. Allowing one month for the job might be optimistic. On the other hand, he'd had a long time to perfect a strategy. By the time he ordered crème brûlée 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? As Wally got behind the wheel and closed his door, Angel said, "Mommy, where's fog come from? And don't say Hawaii." stubbornly withholds them is to take a bitterly cold shower while pressing ice against one's genitals, until the desired facts are recalled or hypothermic collapse ensues. Throughout lunch and, indeed, during his hours as an outpatient at the hospital, Barty gave no indication that he understood the gravity of his situation. He remained cheerful, charming the doctors and technicians with his sweet personality and precocious chatter. And like John Kennedy's death, Zedd's passing was cloaked in mystery, inspiring widespread suspicion of conspiracy. Only a few believed that he had committed suicide, and Junior was certainly not one of those gullible fools. Caesar Zedd, author of *You Have a Right to Be Happy*, would never have blown his brains out with a shotgun, as the authorities preferred the public to believe. "Thank you, Nurse Bressler," he said most solemnly, matching her tone, barely able to control the urge to glance at her, smile, and give her another preview of his quick, pink tongue. 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. By the time he got back to Spruce Hills, the early night had fallen. The pearly, waxing moon floated over a town that glimmered mysteriously among its richness of trees, flickering and shimmering as though it were not a real town, but a dreamland where a multitude of Gypsy clans gathered by the lambent amber light of lanterns and campfires. Later, at home, he gargled until he had drained half a bottle of mint-flavored mouthwash, took the longest shower of his life, and then used the other half of the mouthwash. Not once did he look back to see if the fire had grown visible as a glow against the night sky. The events at Victoria's were part of the past. He was finished with all that. Junior was a forward-thinking, future-oriented man. "That's exactly how I hoped he would be." Relieved, he followed Agnes to the living room. "Listen, Aggie, you know, I don't have anything against Jacob, but—" The big-headed, bulging-eyed, slit-mouthed runt had collected \$850,000 from Naomi's death, so the least he could do was provide a little information. He'd probably bill for the time, anyway. On the short return trip to the ophthalmologist, Agnes crazily considered driving past Chan's office building, cruising onward—ever onward—into the sparkling December night, not just back to Bright Beach, where the bad news would simply come by phone, but to places so far away that the diagnosis could never catch up to them, where the disease would remain unnamed and therefore would have no power over Barty. Saturday morning, Paul made himself useful by assisting Grace with food preparation and by setting out the plates, flatware, and glasses on the dining-room sideboard. A sense of fellowship in extraordinary times drew everyone closer, to hug, to touch, to share the wonder. For a long moment, even in the symphony of the storm, in spite of all the plink-tink-hiss-plop-rattle that arose from every rain-beaten work of man and nature, they seemed to stand here in a hush as deep as Tom had ever heard. To Edom, humanity was obviously not the greater of these two destructive forces. Men and women were part of nature, not above it, and their evil was, therefore, just one more example of nature's malignant intent. They had stopped debating this issue years ago, however, neither man conceding any credibility to the other's dogma. "I'm afraid you're wrong." When Tom opened his left hand, the palm lay as bare as that of a blind beggar in a country of thieves. Meanwhile, his right hand had tightened into a fist again. Having used his body as a clapper in the bell of the Dumpster, Junior had struck a loud reverberant note that tolled like a poorly cast cathedral bell, echoing solemnly off the walls of the flanking buildings, back and forth through the fogbound night. Against the sight of Franklin Chan's pity, which implied the hopelessness of Barty's condition, Agnes closed her eyes. But she opened them at once, because this chosen darkness reminded her that unwanted darkness might be Barty's fate. The kiss was lovely, long and easy, full of restrained passion that boded well for nights to come in the marriage bed. Edom felt uneasy in this kingdom of a strange god. The god that his brother feared was humanity, its dark compulsions, its arrogance. Edom, on the other hand, trembled before Nature, whose wrath was so great that one day she would destroy all things, when the universe collapsed into a super dense nugget of matter the size of a pea. "64 just a little bit ago," the girl said. "I was sitting on the porch, having a Popsicle, and I just figured it out." So smoothly did the waiter move, that three martinis on a corklined mahogany tray seemed to float across the room in front of him and then hover beside their table while he served the cocktails to the lady first, the guest second, and the host third. When Junior checked his Rolex, he realized that he didn't know how long he'd been sitting here since Ichabod had driven off in the Buick. Maybe one minute, maybe ten. Later, in early '66, out of his coma and recovering sufficiently to have visitors, Vanadium spent a most difficult hour with his old friend Harrison White. Out of respect for the memory of his lost daughter, and not at all out of concern for his image as a minister, the reverend had refused to acknowledge either that Seraphim had been pregnant or that she'd been raped—although Max Bellini had already confirmed the pregnancy and believed, based on cop's instinct, that it had been the consequence of rape. Harrison's attitude seemed to be that Phimie was gone, that nothing could be gained by opening this wound, and that even if there was a villain involved, the Christian thing was to forgive, if not forget, and to trust in divine justice. Maybe he went a little crazy then. He wouldn't deny a brief, transient madness. Mysteriously, on the first day of sunny weather in weeks, the 707 had crashed into Jamaica Bay, Queens, killing everyone aboard. Now, in 1965, it remained the worst commercial-aviation disaster in the nation's history, and because of the unprecedented dramatic television coverage, the story was a permanent scar in Celestina's memory, although she had been living a continent away at the time. In a swirl of London Fog and righteous indignation, Neddy turned his back on Junior and drifted away through the nibbling, nattering crowd. "Nah. Every secret society has a secret handshake. We'll have this instead." Her face was still close to his, and she rubbed noses with him. They were in the rain, the solid-glassy-pounding-roaring rain, every bit as much as Gene Kelly had been when he danced and sang and capered along a storm-soaked city street in that movie, but whereas the actor had been saturated by the end of the number, these two children remained dry. Tom's eyes strained to resolve this paradox, even though he knew that all miracles defied resolution. It occurred to her that the knave had

come, as foretold by the cards on that night long ago. She had expected the knave to be a man with sharp eyes and a wicked heart, but the curse was cancer and not a man at all..From the moment the girl was admitted on the evening of January 5, the nurses at St. Mary's Hospital in San Francisco called her Phimie, too, not because they knew her well enough to love her, but because that was the name they heard Celestina use..Commodified fantasy takes no risks: it invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth-telling to sentimental platitude. Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits. Profoundly disturbing moral choices are sanitized, made cute, made safe. The passionately conceived ideas of the great story-tellers are copied, stereotyped, reduced to toys, molded in bright-colored plastic, advertised, sold, broken, junked, replaceable, interchangeable.. "I really am sorry about this," Junior said, regretting the necessity to deny her the right to look good at her own funeral, "but it's got to appear to be a crime of passion." Celestina slammed the door, pressed the lock button in the knob, shoved-rocked-muscled the dresser in front of the door, astonished by her own strength, and heard Angel speaking into the phone: "Mommy's moving furniture." White's paintings, which Junior found naive, dull, and insipid in the extreme. She imbued her work with all the qualities that real artists disdained: realistic detail, storytelling, beauty, optimism, and even charm..She slept for a while, waking to a prayer spoken softly but fervently in Spanish..Aware of the dangers of dehydration, he drank a bottle of water and put two half-gallon containers of Gatorade in the Suburban..She whispered then: "You are my little lampion, Barty. You light the way for me." "You can't take much of anything by mouth for a few hours yet," said the nurse. "Nausea is too great a risk. Retching might start you hemorrhaging again." In spite of her nature, Agnes could not find forgiveness in her heart this time. Words of absolution clotted in her throat. Her bitterness dismayed her, but she could not deny it.. "I don't know." He was silent a moment. "That's what's going to be interesting." "I'm no hero," Paul insisted. "I just got your mom out of there in the process of saving myself." He said this as though confident Agnes would understand what he meant, with a smile and with a glint in his eyes that almost became a wink, as if they were members of a secret society in which these three repeated words were code, embodying a complex meaning other than what was apparent to the uninitiated..The bitch was getting tired, but Junior still didn't like his odds in a hand-to-hand confrontation. Her hair was disarranged. Her eyes flashed with such wildness that he was half convinced he saw elliptical pupils like those of a jungle cat. Her lips were skinned back from her teeth in a snarl..On other nights, she had overheard this and been touched. On this Christmas Eve, however, it filled her with wonder and wondering, for she recalled their conversation earlier, at Joey's grave:..We know a dozen different Arthurs now, all of them true. The Shire changed irrevocably even in Bilbos lifetime. Don Quixote went riding out to Argentina and met Jorge Luis Borges there. Plus c'est la meme chose, plus fa change..Considering Junior's actions on his last night in Spruce Hills, eleven months ago, he must be cautious now. Without incriminating himself, pretending ignorance, he hoped to learn if his carefully planned scenario, regarding Victoria's death and Vanadium's sudden disappearance, had convinced the authorities-or whether something had gone wrong that might explain the quarter at the diner..Spacious, the living room was furnished for two purposes: as a parlor in which to receive visiting friends, but also with two beds, because here Paul and Perri slept every night..Edom removed two of the pies from the table and put them on the counter near the ovens.. "This was back on January 24, 1556," said Edom with unhesitating authority, for he had memorized tens of thousands of facts about the worst natural disasters in history..Celestina jammed the shaft of the crank into the casing socket. Wouldn't fit. Her hands were shaking. Steel fins on the shaft of the crank had to be lined up just-so with slots in the socket. She fumbled, fumbled.. "We don't believe it does, do we, Daddy? We don't believe blood tells. We believe we're born to hope, under a mantle of mercy, don't we?" If he had known that he would break his solemn vow twice before the month was ended-and that neither victim, unfortunately, would be a Hackachak--he might not have fallen asleep so easily. And he might not have dreamed of cleverly stealing hundreds of quarters out of Thomas Vanadium's pockets while the baffled detective searched for them in vain..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 WhiteOccasionally, when Junior returned home from a day of gallery hopping or an evening at a restaurant, Industrial Woman-the artist's title-scared away his mellow mood. More than once, he'd cried out in alarm before realizing this was just his prized Poriferan..A SEVERE THIRST INDICATED to Agnes that she wasn't dead. There would be no thirst in paradise..Whereas Paul had been confounded in his desire to express his admiration for Salk, he was able to speak about Perri at length and with ease. Her wit, her heart, her wisdom, her kindness, her beauty, her goodness, her courage were the threads in a narrative tapestry that Pad could have continued weaving for all the rest of his days. Since her death, he hadn't been able to talk about her with anyone he knew, because his friends tended to focus on him, on his suffering, when he wanted them only to understand Perri better, to realize what an exceptional person she had been. He wanted her to be remembered, after he was gone, wanted her grace and her fortitude to be recalled and respected. She was too fine a woman to leave without a ripple in her wake, and the thought that her memory might pass away with Paul himself was anguishing.

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