

MARION AND THE SECRET LETTER

In the spring and summer of '66, he flew to Memphis, Tennessee, stayed a few days, and walked 288 miles to St. Louis. From St. Louis he hiked west 253 miles to Kansas City, Missouri, and then southwest to Wichita. From Wichita to Oklahoma City. From Oklahoma City east to Fort Smith, Arkansas, from whence he rode home to Bright Beach on a series of Greyhound buses..He must be careful in his approach to her. He dared not rush into this. Think it through. Devise a strategy. This valuable opportunity must not be wasted..She refused to look at him, the way her mother had refused to look at him when he'd been making love to her in the parsonage. She began twisting a red pencil in a handheld sharpener, making sure that the shavings fell into a can kept for that purpose. "I saw it here..twenty-eight pounds. Typically, seven to eight pounds of this is the fetus. The placenta and the amniotic fluid weigh three pounds. The remaining eighteen are due to water retention and fat stores..Or as her father often said, happily mocking his own rhetorical eloquence: "Brighten the corner where you are, and you will light the world." "You don't get the heebie-jeebies," Max said. "You give 'em. Tell me what's wrong." 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..A nurse fussed over him as she helped him into bed, concerned about his paleness and his tremors. She was attentive, efficient, compassionate but she wasn't in the least attractive, and he wished she would."Not so unbelievable," said Jacob. "Forty-five thousand people every year die in automobiles. Cars aren't transportation. They're death machines. Tens of thousands are disfigured, maimed for life." "I suspect," Tom said, "that any job you set your mind to, you'd be as good as you are at teeth." 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 hypertensive crisis caused by ... eclampsia, I think it is. Baby survived. Call me, huh?". The boy fell and rolled even as he pitched the can, anticipating the shots that Cain fired, which cracked into the doorframe inches from Tom's knees..Footsteps in the hall drew their attention to the open door, where the surgeon appeared in his loose cotton greens..One of the paramedics had stooped beside him to press a cool hand against the nape of his neck. Now this man said urgently, "Kenny!..Nolly shrugged. "He can't know for sure. And anyway, he didn't get the pushed idea until he'd already taken the case." If Junior were weak-minded enough to succumb to madness, this was the moment when he should have fallen into an abyss of insanity. He heard an internal cracking, felt a terrible splintering in his mind, but he held himself together with sheer willpower, remembering to breathe slowly and deeply..His alcohol-soured breath washed over Agnes as he asked, "How's Bartholomew doing, is he okay, is the little guy in good health?" "It isn't that, Daddy. You remember, when we were all together the day before yesterday, how afraid Phimie was of this man. Not just for herself ... for the baby."..As to the distressing matter of Seraphim's daughter, Junior at first decided to return to San Francisco to torture the truth out of Nolly Wulfstan. Then he realized that he'd been referred to Wulfstan by the same man who had told him that Thomas Vanadium was missing and was believed to be Victoria Bressler's killer..In bed, lights out, Junior marveled at his daredevil spirit. He never stopped surprising himself..Junior could only imagine how flattered Victoria would be to receive the attentions of a twenty-three-year-old stud, flattered and grateful. When he contemplated all the ways she could express that gratitude, there was barely enough room behind the wheel of the Suburban for him and his manhood..More likely than not, Victoria spoke directly to the maniac detective. Even if she reported her sordid fabrications to another officer, it would have gotten back to Vanadium, and the cop would have sought her out at once to hear her filth firsthand, whereupon she would have enhanced her story until it sounded as though Junior had grabbed her knockers and had tried to shove his tongue down her throat..He paused, giving them a chance to ask the obvious question-and then smiled at their reticence..Mary was at play here, and the sight of her, his first in seven years, almost brought Barty to his knees. She was the image of her mother, and he knew that this must be at least a little bit what Angel had looked like when, at three, she had initially arrived here in 1968, when she explored the kitchen on that first day and found the toaster under a sock..In retrospect, he realized meditation didn't suit him. It was a passive activity, while by nature he was a man of action, happiest when doing.."Could you undo the spell you put on her?". Now Barty peered at the card, smacked his lips, smiled, and said, "Ga." With a flatulent squawk of the butt trumpet, he soiled his diaper..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..Perhaps, reluctant to admit to herself that she had yearned for him to do everything that he'd done, she had slowly been inflamed by guilt, until she convinced herself that she had, indeed, been raped. Psychotic little bitch..The guy was carrying a purse, whatever that meant, and when he walked through the door, he had a goofy look on his face, but his expression changed when he saw Junior..When she didn't at once accept his generosity, he said, "All my life, I've lived just to get through the day. First survival. Then achievement, acquisition. Houses, investments, antiques ... There's nothing wrong with any of that. But it didn't fill the emptiness. Maybe one day I'll return to medicine. But that's a hectic existence, and right now I want peace, calm, time to reflect. Whatever I do from here on . . . I want my life to have a degree of purpose it's never had before. Can you understand that?". The blocking dresser, which doubled as a vanity, was surmounted by a mirror. One bullet drilled through the plywood backing, made a spider-web puzzle of the silvered glass, lodged in the wall above the bed-thwack-and kicked out a spray of plaster chips..Weird, this kid. Making him uneasy. All in white, with her incomprehensible yammering about talking books and talking dogs and her mother driving pies, and working on a damn strange drawing for a little girl..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.Houses

made settling noises all the time. That was one reason why he couldn't rely much on sound to guide him through the darkness. A noise he thought had been made by the weight of his tread might as easily have been produced by the house itself as it adjusted to the. He would never allow himself to be bankrupted and made poor again. Never. His fortune had been won at enormous risk, with great fortitude and determination. He must defend it at any cost. Kathleen watched him with obvious amusement, aware that he was savoring her suspense as much as he was the appetizer. "Naomi, are you in there?" Junior whispered again, peering into the windows of the girl's soul. To Perri's bed, a journey of only a few steps, but farther than unwanted Rome. The carpet seeming to pull at his feet, to suck like mud under his shoes. The air as thick as liquid in his resistant to his progress. Mrs. Cain's little boy felt small, weak, sorry for himself, and terribly alone. The detective was still here, but his presence only aggravated Junior's sense of isolation. Tom didn't understand Edom's comment or the smiles that it drew, but otherwise, he was impressed by the ease with which these people absorbed what he had said and by the imagination with which they began to expand upon his speculation. It was almost as though they had long known the shape of what he'd told them and that he was only filling in a few confirming details. Between his surgeries and for many months thereafter, Vanadium had devoted his energies to speech therapy, physical rehabilitation, and the concoction of periodic torments for Enoch Cain, which Simon Magusson was able to implement, every few months, through Nolly and Kathleen. The idea wasn't to bring Cain to justice by torturing his conscience, since he'd allowed his conscience to atrophy a long time ago, but to keep him unsettled and thereby magnify the impact of his first face-to-face encounter with the resurrected Vanadium. Although he considered tearing up the letter and throwing it away he knew that his perceptions were clouded by grief and that what he'd written might seem fine if he reviewed it in a less dark state of mind. He returned the letter to the envelope and put it in the drawer of his nightstand. To look entirely like her name, she needed only white wings. He would give her wings: a short flight out the window, into the oak. Before they set out for the amusement park, Agnes pulled him aside, held him close, and said, "Listen, kid of mine, I'm not giving up. Don't think I ever would. Let's have fun today. This evening, you and I and Angel will convene a meeting of the North Pole Society of Not Evil Adventurers"-the girl had become the third member years ago" and all truths will be told and secrets known. ".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. The first was an ace of hearts. This, Maria said, was a very good card, indeed. It meant that Barty would be lucky in love. 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. Paul shook his head. He presented a second picture of Perri, this one taken on Christmas Day, 1964, less than a month before she died. She lay in her bed in the living room, her body shrunken, but her face so beautiful and alive. To the window. The warm room sucked cooling fog out of the night, and she leaned across the sill into the streaming mist. "You must be thinking of someone else," she said, pushing a wad of bills into his hand. "Me, I'm a jellyfish in high heels." Indeed, subconsciously, she had known that Nella was gone since receiving the call at 4:15 this morning. When the old woman had finished what she needed to say, the silence on the line had been eerily perfect, without one crackle of static or electronic murmur, unlike anything Celestina had ever heard on a telephone before. From her Volkswagen bus in the middle of the line, Maria joined them. "In case we get separated, Agnes, I don't have an itinerary." "Why should I care whether you have any peace?" she asked, and she seemed to be listening to a woman other than herself. "It was. But maybe that's not the whole story. Anyway, we know the usual poses these guys strike, the attitudes they think are deceptive and clever. Most of them are so obvious, they might as well just stick their willy in a light socket and save us a lot of trouble. This, however, is a new approach. Tends to make you want to believe in the poor guy." Because she'd enjoyed some limited use of her right arm, it was less wasted than her left, although not normal. Paul pulled down that sleeve of her pajamas. "All right, the scary one." "I SOMETIMES EVEN EAT SPIDERS WITH MY CAVIAR." "Now who's being gross?" The morning that it happened, Edom woke early from a nightmare about the roses. 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?" The moon shimmered, and the stars blurred-but only briefly, for her devotion to this boy was a fiery furnace that tempered the steel of her spine and brought a drying heat to her eyes. Without Franklin Chan's full approval but with his complete understanding, Agnes took Barty home. On Monday, they would return to Hoag Hospital, where Barty would receive surgery on Tuesday. The floor of the spacious bathroom featured beige marble tiles with diamond-shaped inlays of black granite. The countertop and the shower stall were fabricated from matching marble, and the same marble was employed in the wainscoting. Almost as an afterthought, as he was leaving, he tucked the brochure for "This Momentous Day" into a jacket pocket. There would be amusement value in hearing a group of cutting-edge young artists analyze Celestina's greeting-card images. Besides, as the Academy of Art College was the premier school of its type on the West Coast, a few of the partygoers might actually know her and be able to give him some valuable background. The party raged in a cavernous loft on the third-and-top-floor of a converted industrial building, the communal residence and studio of a group of artists who believed that art, sex, and politics were the three hammers of violent revolution, or something like that. 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." He carried the mug to the sink, poured the brew down the drain and saw the cooler standing in the corner. He hadn't noticed it before. A medium-size, molded-plastic, Styrofoam-lined ice chest, of the type you filled with beer and took on picnics..Succinctly, Edom told Jacob about visiting Obadiah, the magician with the mangled hands. Then: "When we left, I followed Agnes, and Obadiah held me back to say, 'Your secret's safe with me.'" "No, no. But being around him so much, inevitably I absorb some details. He's a compelling speaker when the subject interests him." In the faraway, at the limits of night and fog, the dog bit off his bark in expectation..Junior tipped his head back and gazed up toward the section of broken-out railing along the high observation deck..Swift and yellow, Angel flew to her mother, grabbing at one of the bunched drapes as if she might hide behind it.."She's got preeclampsia. It's a condition that occurs in about five percent of pregnancies, virtually always after the twenty-fourth week, and usually it can be treated successfully. But I'm not going to sugarcoat this, Celestina. In her case, it's more serious. She hasn't been seeing a doctor, no prenatal care, and here she is in the middle of her thirtieth week, about ten days from delivery." Shaking with a fear that had nothing to do with Junior Cain and flying bullets, or even with memories of Josef Krepp and his vile necklace, Tom Vanadium closed the sketch pad and put it on the window seat. He opened the window, and in rushed the susurrant of breeze-stirred oak leaves..The white Buick glided through the tides of fog like a ghost ship plying a ghost sea."--and we're from different worlds, which I respect. I respect you and your wonderful family ... your centeredness, your certainty. I want to do this only because it's what I owe you." Far from idiotic, Junior's cause was his survival and salvation, and he committed himself to it with every fiber of his body, with all of his mind and heart.."Ouch," said Edom, and this earned him loving smiles from Maria, Agnes, and Barty..As he stepped out of the street, Don't Walk shortened to Walk, and when he checked for pursuit, he found it. Here came Vanadium, who would have been shivering in want of a topcoat if his flesh had been real..Although she had acutely felt the loss of Joey during the past three years, she had never missed him as much as she missed him now. Marriage is an expression of love and respect and trust and faith in the future, but the union of husband and wife is also an alliance against the challenges and tragedies of life, a promise that with me in your corner, you will never stand alone..In the kitchen, Barty sat at the table, and Paul's heart pinched at the sight of the boy in padded eyepatches..On the serving tables, the canap? trays held only stained paper doilies, crumbs, and empty plastic champagne glasses..The Worry Bear carries worries in his pockets. Under his Panama hat and in two gold lockets. Carries worries on his back and under his arms. Nevertheless, dear old Worry Bear has his charms..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..Because Harrison, with the best of intentions, had not wanted to open wounds, Cain could walk up to Celestina anywhere, anytime, and she wouldn't know that he might have been her sister's rapist. To her, his face was that of any stranger..Barty approached stair climbing as a mathematical problem, calculating the precise movement of each leg and placement of each foot necessary to successfully negotiate the obstacle. He proceeded less slowly on the next three steps than he had on the first three, and thereafter he ascended with growing confidence, pumping his legs with machinelike precision..This Dry Sack-assisted effort at recollection, however, brought back to him one thing in addition to all the sweet lubricious images of Seraphim naked. The voice of her father. On the tape recorder. The reverend droning on and on as Junior pinned the devout daughter to the mattress..The moment he had seen the building in which Nolly maintained an office-an aged three-story brick structure in the North Beach district, a seedy strip club occupying the ground floor-Junior knew he'd found the breed of snoop he needed. The detective was at the top of six flights of narrow stairs-no elevator-at the end of a dreary hallway with worn linoleum and with walls mottled by stains of an origin best left unconsidered. The air smelled of cheap disinfectant, stale cigarette smoke, stale beer, and dead hopes..Evidently, her face was knotted with the effort to remember what the child had looked like, for the physician said, "Yes? What's wrong?" Although a cold current crackled along the cable of her spine, Agnes smiled at the card. She was determined to change the dark mood that had descended over them..With Angel at breakfast, instead of just Uncle Jacob, at least Barty had someone to talk to, even if she did insist on speaking more often through her dolls than directly. Apparently, the dolls were on the table, propped up with bowls. The first, Miss Pixie Lee, had a high-pitched, squeaky voice. The second, Miss Velveeta Cheese, spoke in a three year-old's idea of what a throaty-voiced, sophisticated woman sounded like, although to Barty's ear, this was more suitable to a stuffed bear..Now he had to focus on being ready for the evening of January 12: the reception for Celestina White's art show. She had adopted her sister's baby. Little Bartholomew was in her care; and soon, the kid would be within Junior's reach.."You think I can turn the King's order down? You want to see me sent to row with the slaves in the galley we're building? Use your head, boy!" From the chair in the corner, where Agnes sat, it seemed that Joshua took an inordinately long time on what was usually a quick examination. Worry so weighed on her that the physician's customary thoroughness seemed, this time, to be filled with dire meaning..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..Having survived the night, Edom and Jacob were waiting in the hall. Each kissed his nephew, but neither could speak..By dawn, when the intestinal paroxysms finally passed, this bold new man of adventure felt as flat and limp as road kill..The short walk across the room, to the hero's table, looked more daunting to Paul than the trek he'd just completed. He was nobody, a small-town pharmacist who missed more work each month, who relied increasingly on his worried employees to cover for him, and who would lose his business if he didn't get a grip on himself. He had never done a great deed, never

saved a life. He had no right to impose upon this man, and now he knew he hadn't the nerve to do so, either..Someone named Bartholomew had adopted Seraphim's son and named the boy after himself Junior applied the patience learned through meditation to the task at hand, and instinctively, he soon evolved a motivating mantra that continuously cycled through his mind while he studied the telephone directories: Find the father, kill the son..Maria Gonzalez arrived with her daughters, and while it was natural for Angel to be drawn to the company of older girls, she had no interest in anyone but Barty.. "I get peed off, and I miss some things terrible. But I'm not sad. And you've got to not be sad, either, 'cause it spoils everything." The man's voice echoed hollowly in Junior's ears, as if coming from the far end of a tunnel. Or from the terminus of a death-row hallway, on the long walk between the last meal and the execution chamber..The shakes returned, became more violent than previously--and then once more passed..Then by ambulance to the hospital, whisked into surgery, and for a while, blessed unconsciousness.. "Well, sure," said Mary, "without dying first. That would be the easy way to get there. I'm a Lampion, aren't I? Do we take the easy way, if we can avoid it? Did Daddy take the easiest way up the oak tree?" The police. The stupid police. Ringing the bell when they knew he'd been shot. Ringing the damn doorbell when he lay here helpless, the Industrial Woman lurching toward him, his toe on the other side of the kitchen, ringing the doorbell when he was losing enough blood to give transfusions to an entire ward of wounded hemophiliacs. The stupid bastards were probably expecting him to serve tea and a plate of butter cookies, little paper doilies between each cup and saucer..He liked her face, too. She wore no makeup, and pulled her brown hair back in a bun. Some might say she was mousy, but the only things mousy that Nolly saw about her were a piquant tilt to her nose and a certain cuteness..Junior released Neddy and, letting him slide down the wall to the floor, returned to the door to lock it. Reaching for the latch, he suddenly expected the door to fly open, revealing Thomas Vanadium, dead and risen. The ghost didn't appear, but Junior was shaken by the mere thought of such a supernatural confrontation in the middle of this crisis..Instead, he imagined Vanadium's blunt fingers moving over the intravenous apparatus with surprising delicacy, reading the function of the equipment as a blind man would read Braille with swift, sure, gliding fingertips. He imagined the detective finding the injection port in the main drip line, pinching it between thumb and forefinger. Saw him produce a hypodermic needle as a magician would pluck a silk scarf from the ether. Nothing in the syringe except deadly air. The needle sliding into the portBriefly, Junior felt humiliated. He wanted to drag the detective out of the car and stomp on his smug, dead face..The old man assumed the solemn and knowing expression of one guarding mysteries, a sphinx without headdress and mane. "If I told you, dear lady, it wouldn't be magic anymore. Merely a trick." As Joey opened the driver's door and got in behind the steering wheel, he said, "Okay?" "Fear?" Kathleen asked, more interested in Vanadium's words than in his prestidigitation. "You said you're offering fear to Cain ... as if that was something he would want." "Do you want me to call and confirm how Vanadium was harassing you up here?" asked Magusson..Although he ate more meals in restaurants than not, he hadn't ordered a burger in twenty-two months, since finding the quarter embedded in the half-melted slice of cheddar, in December of '65. Indeed, since then, he'd never risked a sandwich of any kind in a restaurant, limiting his selections to foods that were served open on the plate.. "You better wise up, you tree-humping nitwit," Rudy advised Junior, grabbing the bed railing as if he might tear it off and use it to club his son-in-law senseless..To prove himself, he read a little of Dickens when she requested it, a passage from Great Expectations. Then a passage from Twain..Maria stood at the bedside, leaning with her forearms against the railing. A silver-and-onyx rosary tightly wrapped her small brown hands, although she was not counting the beads or murmuring Hail Marys. Her prayer was for Agnes's baby..THIS IS THE FIRST PAGE of the Book of the Dark, written some six hundred years ago in Berila, on Enlad..She was in Paul's arms again, as though by magic, and he ran as fire broke through the cedar-shake shingles and as the roof shuddered under them. Airborne through billowing smoke. Across flames that briefly caressed the soles of his shoes.. "The pepper tree had been whispering in the breeze, the roses nodding their bright heads. Now a stillness came into the cemetery, as if rising from beneath the grass, from out of that city of the lost.." "Where did you hear that expression," she demanded, though she couldn't conceal her amusement..Now he shuffled the first of the four decks precisely as he had shuffled the first deck on Friday evening, and he set it aside.

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