

THE MINIATURE WIFE: AND OTHER STORIES

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Not to wow friends with card tricks. Not because the challenge intrigued him. He wanted to be able to give Agnes winning cards once in a while, if she was losing too frequently or needed to have her spirits lifted. He didn't feed her winning hands often enough to make her suspicious or to make the games less fun for Edom or Joey. He was judicious. The effort he expended--the thousands of hours of practice--was repaid with interest each time Agnes laughed with delight after being dealt a perfect hand..When he reported for a physical and a reassessment of his draft classification, on Wednesday, December 15, he left the insert in his hitching shoe; however, he limped like old Walter Brennan, the actor, hitching around the ranch in The Real McCoys..That evening, he was filled with a greater sense of adventure than he'd felt since arriving in the city from Oregon. Consequently, he treated himself to three glasses of a superb Bordeaux and a filet mignon in the same elegant hotel lounge where he had dined on his first night in San Francisco, almost three years earlier..Her eyes, lustrous pools, brimmed with the need to know, but she respected the deal. "I only half understood all that, and I don't even know which half, but in some strange way, it feels true. Thank you. I will think about it tonight, when I can't sleep." She stepped close and kissed him on the cheek. "Who are you, Tom Vanadium?".the sentences. The substance of what she said and the tone in which she said it were so perfect that it almost seemed as though an angel had relieved her of this burden by possessing her long enough to help her son understand what must happen and why..Now her mooring was Wally Lipscomb--obstetrician, pediatrician, landlord, and best friend--who arrived halfway through the reception. As she listened to Helen Greenbaum's sales report, Celestina held Wally's hand so tightly that had it been a plastic champagne flute, it would have cracked..Agnes's faith told her that the world was infinitely complex and full of mystery, and in a peculiar way, Barty's talk of infinite possibilities supported her belief and gave her the comfort to sleep. Monday morning, New Year's Day, Agnes carried two suitcases out of the back door, set them on the porch, and blinked in surprise at the sight of Edom's yellow-and-white Ford Country Squire parked in the driveway, in front of the garage. He and Jacob were loading their suitcases into the car..Vanadium's wounds were too grievous to pass for accidental injuries. Even if there were some way to disguise them through clever staging, no one would believe that Victoria had died in a freak fall and that Vanadium, rushing to her side, had slipped and tumbled and sustained mortal head injuries, as well. Such a strong whiff of slapstick would put even the Spruce Hills police on to the scent of murder..Wet cobblestones and tattered blacktop. Hurry, hurry. Past the lighted casement window in the gallery men's room..Around the dinner table, the adults applauded, but the tougher audience squinted at the ceiling, toward which she believed the coin had arced, then at the table, where it ought to have fallen among the water glasses or in her creamed corn. At last she looked at Tom and said, "Not magic.".Celestina extended her left hand, which shook so badly that she nearly knocked over both their wineglasses. "I will.".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..This time, he vowed never to kill again, except in self-defense, regardless of the provocation. This tougher condition pleased him. No one achieved significant self-improvement by setting low standards for himself.Edom and Jacob came to the house, asking what Dr. Chan had said, and Agnes lied to them. "There are some test results we won't have until Monday, but he thinks Barty is going to be all right.". "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it, you understand," Neddy whispered with a sort of fierce conciliation, "but I'm not gay, and I'm not interested in teaching you the piano or anything else. Besides, after the stories Renee told about you, I can't imagine why you think any friend of his ... hers would get near you. You need help. Renee is what she is, but she's not a bad person, she's generous and she's sweet. She doesn't deserve to be beaten, abused, and ... and all those horrible things you did. Excuse me.".Already the fortune foretold, which she had strived to dismiss as a game with no consequences, was coming true..Returning the newborn to the nun, Celestina asked for the use of a phone, and for privacy..In her campaign to keep her weight gain to a minimum, anorexia was her ally. She learned to find pleasure in hunger pangs.. "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.".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..calm. He tried to imagine what Victoria's breasts would look like, freed from all restraint..Drawn by voices on the second floor, Tom took the stairs two at a time. A man and a boy. Barty and Cain. To the left in the hallway, and then to a room on the right..Munching an Almond Joy, Junior returned to the phone book, with no choice but to find Bartholomew the hard way.. "It's a lot," Angel insisted. "Wally gave me an Oreo, last time I saw him. You like Oreos?".He wanted the most expensive box for Joey; but Joey, a modest and prudent man, would have disapproved. Instead, he selected a handsome but not ornate casket just above the median price..He reached toward the dead man's closed hand, but he couldn't find the courage to touch it. He was afraid that if he pried open the stiff fingers, he would discover a quarter inside..Requital. Restitutional apology, which must have been learned in a law school where English was the second language. Even atonement..Tom Vanadium was no alarmist, and the most logical explanation came to him first. Paul had wanted to learn how to roll a quarter across his knuckles, and in spite of being dexterously challenged, he practiced hopefully from time to time. No doubt, he had sat at the table this morning--or even last evening, before bed-dropping the coin repeatedly, until he exhausted his patience..In this brighter light, he further examined the gallery brochure and discovered Celestina's photograph. She and her sister were not as alike as twins, but the resemblance was striking..Agnes drew him into her arms and lifted him off the desk and embraced him tightly, with his head on her shoulder and his face nestled against her neck, as she'd held him when he was a baby.. "There's no clear evidence of birth defects, but a couple tests reveal some worrisome anomalies. We'll know when we see the child..". "Now you don't have to worry," Angel said, "about what happens to him if ever you're gone, Aunt Aggie. If he can do this, he can do anything, and you can rest easy..".under the spoon to catch drips, she conveyed the shimmering sliver to Agnes's mouth..He felt lightheaded again. But this time he knew why. Not an oncoming case of the flu. He was straining against the cocoon of his life to date, straining to be born in a new and better form. He had been a pupa, encased in a chrysalis of fear and confusion, but now he was an imago, a fully evolved butterfly, because he had used the power of his beautiful rage to improve himself. When Bartholomew was dead, Junior Cain would at last spread his wings and fly..Currently, the rental market was extremely tight. The first day of his search resulted only in the discovery that he was going to have to pay more than he expected even for modest quarters..Raising his revolver, Tom squeezed off two shots, but the gun didn't discharge..So they had cooked up this project, math and mayhem, geometry of limbs and branches, arboreal science and childish stunt, a test of strategy and strength and skill--and of the scary limits of nine-year-old bravado..Although Junior had not answered, Vanadium said, "Yes, I thought you heard it..".On this January twilight, as Maria Elena Gonzalez drove south along the coast from Newport Beach, all men of the sea must

have been reaching for bottles of rum to celebrate the fruit-punch sky: ripe cherries in the west, blood oranges overhead, clustered grapes dark purple in the east..Those who had just met her and those who were overly charmed by eccentricity called her Seraphim, her name complete. Her teachers, neighbors, and casual acquaintances called her Sera. Those who knew her best and loved her the most deeply--like her sister, Celestina called her Phimie..Her lead gaze was still surprisingly clear. How remarkable that the impact hadn't caused a starburst hemorrhage in either of her exquisite, lavender-blue eyes. No blood, lust surprise..Worse than the tenderness in the bones, the bleeding gums, the headaches, the ugly bruises, worse than the anemia-related weariness and the spells of breathlessness, was the suffering that her battle caused to those whom she loved. More frequently as the days passed, they were unable to conceal their worry and their sorrow. She held their hands when they trembled. She asked them to pray with her when they expressed anger that this should happen to her-of all people, to her, and she wouldn't let them go until the anger was gone. More than once, she pulled sweet Angel into her lap, stroked her hair, and soothed her with talk of all the good times shared in better days. And always Barty, watching over her in his blindness, aware that she would not be dying in all the places where she was, but taking no consolation from the fact that she would continue to exist in other worlds where he could never again be at her side..Too much clatter, drawing attention. No leisure for romance now, no chance for a two-sister score. just kill Celestina, kill Bartholomew, and go, go..Leaving three of the pats in the container, he carefully placed the fourth on the vinyl-tile floor..The accountant lived in a white Georgian house on a street lined with huge old evergreens..The coin stopped turning, pinched flat between the knuckles of the cops middle and ring fingers. He retrieved a box of Kleenex from the nightstand and offered it to his suspect. "Here. ". "As long as the case was open and you were the sole suspect," said the lawyer, "they couldn't negotiate an out-of-court settlement with you. But they were afraid that if eventually they couldn't prove you killed her, then they'd be in an even worse position when a wrongful death suit finally went before a jury.".Missing windshield. Considering that the space was pinched by the crumpled roof, however, and in light of Agnes's pregnancy and imminent second-stage labor, the severe contortions involved in this extraction would be too dangerous.., Heart jumping like the heart of a fox-stalked rabbit, she ran from the driveway into the yard. She would have cried out if her throat hadn't seized up with terror at the sight of her boy at neck-breaking height. By the time she could speak, she realized that a shout, or even the unexpected sound of her plaintive voice, might unnerve him, cause him to misstep, and bring him caroming down, limb to limb, in a bone snapping plunge.. "Last time I looked, Miss Galloway lived to the south of us. Retired. Never married. No children..". "Less than a year and a half ago, Hurricane Flora--she killed over six thousand in the Caribbean..". "Our new roof," Bill said, pointing overhead, "will hold through any hurricane. Fine work. You tell Agnes what fine..He waited for Otter to nod, but Otter stood motionless..Flush with the promise of their engagement, still excited by the success at the gallery, with Angel exuberant in spite of the hour and Oreo energized, he was amazed that they had made the transfer of the little red whirlwind from house to Buick to house with nothing else forgotten other than one purse. Celie called it ballet, but Wally thought that it was merely momentary order in chaos, the challenging-joyous-frustrating-delightful-exhilarating chaos of a life full of hope and love and children, which he wouldn't have traded for calm or kingdoms..Junior's attorney-Simon Magusson--insisted upon full disclosure of maintenance records and advisories relating to the fire tower and to other forest-service structures for which the state and the county had sole or joint custodial responsibility. If a wrongful--death suit was filed, this information would have to be divulged anyway during normal disclosure procedures prior to trial, and since maintenance logs and advisories were of public record, Hisscus and Knacker and Nork agreed to provide what was requested..In the passenger's seat, Barty was cushioned in his mother's arms. At times, the boy cooed or gurgled, or made a wet chording sound..Although she already knew that the answer could not be cheerily optimistic, Celestina wondered, "Is the baby likely to be . . . normal?". Kathleen had never heard a religious calling described in such odd words as these, and she was surprised, indeed, to hear a priest refer to God as "strange..". "Bet I could, and sell it, too," she said. "I might not be as good at it as I am at teeth, but I'd be better than some I've read..". About ten feet from the trunk of the oak, Barty departed his straight route and began to circle the tree..Agnes leaned forward in her chair: knees together, clasped hands resting on her knees, forehead against her hands..Several large Dumpsters hulked nearby, dark rectangles less seen than suggested in the slowly churning murk, like forms in a dream, as ominous as graveyard sarcophaguses, each as suitable for a musician's carcass as any of the others..The spectral singer didn't exhibit her blood-and-bone sisters' reluctance to pursue her man..Angel. A less exotic synonym for her own name. Seraphim's angel. The angel of an angel..Not one day in anyone's life, so her father taught, is an uneventful day, no day without profound meaning, no matter how dull and boring it might seem, no matter whether you are a seamstress or a queen, a shoeshine boy or a movie star, a renowned philosopher or a Downs syndrome child. Because in every day of your life, there are opportunities to perform little kindnesses for others, both by conscious acts of will and unconscious example. Each smallest act of kindness--even just words of hope when they are needed, the remembrance of a birthday, a compliment that engenders a smile--reverberates across great distances and spans of time, affecting lives unknown to the one whose generous spirit was the source of this good echo, because kindness is passed on and grows each time it's passed, until a simple courtesy becomes an act of selfless courage years later and far away. Likewise, each small meanness, each thoughtless expression of hatred, each envious and bitter act, regardless of how petty, can inspire others, and is therefore the seed that ultimately produces evil fruit, poisoning people whom you have never met and never will. All human lives are so profoundly and intricately entwined--those dead, those living, those generations yet to come--that the fate of all is the fate of each, and the hope of humanity rests in every heart and in every pair of hands. Therefore, after every failure, we are obliged to strive again for success, and when faced with the end of one thing, we must build something new and better in the ashes, just as from pain and grief, we must weave hope, for each of us is a thread critical to the strength--to the very survival--of the human tapestry. Every hour in every life contains such often-unrecognized potential to affect the world that the great days for which we, in our dissatisfaction, so often yearn are already with us; all great days and thrilling possibilities are combined always in this momentous day..If she'd connected with his left side, as she intended, she might have broken his arm or cracked a few ribs. But he saw the chair coming, and as agile as a base runner dodging a shortstop's tag, he turned away from her, taking the blow across his back..Most likely, if Victoria was entertaining, the visitor's car would have been parked in the driveway..Thus began the first day of the last weekend of their old lives. Maria visited on Saturday, sitting in the kitchen, embroidering the collar and cuffs of a blouse, while Agnes baked pies..Serving a formal dinner was Agnes's way of declaring--to herself more than to anyone else in attendance--that the time had come for her to get on with life for Bartholomew's sake, but also for her own.. "I knew," said Wally, braking for a red traffic light, "that you'd be thinking of Phimie now, and thinking of her

would lead you to your father's words, because as short as her life might have been, Phimie was a Bartholomew. She left her mark." As Junior paced the hotel room, his fear made way for anger. All he wanted was peace, a chance to grow as a person, an opportunity to improve himself And now this. The unfairness, the injustice, galled him. He seethed with a sense of persecution..Minutes later, once more in a corridor conference with Dr. Daines, she was forced to temper her new optimism..WEDNESDAY, fully two days after delivering honey-raisin pear pies with Agnes, Edom worked up the nerve to visit Jacob..For breakfast, he avoided sugar. He ate cold roast beef and drank milk laced with a double shot of brandy..Thus far, there were only two unexpected developments, the first being his explosive vomiting. He hoped he would never have to endure another such episode..Routinely she dreamed of Joey. Not nightmares. No blood, no reliving of the horror. In her dreams, she was on a picnic with Joey or at a carnival with him. Walking a beach. Watching a movie. A warmth pervaded these scenes, an aura of companionship, love. Except eventually she always glanced away from Joey, and when she looked again, he was gone, and she knew that he was gone forever..Jolene started to refill his coffee mug-then thought better of it. "Maybe you don't need more caffeine, Edom." "Sometimes she wrote little paragraphs to God, very touching and humble notes of gratitude, thanking Him for bringing you into her life." "So I drew attention to myself. Raised suspicions. One night, in St. Louis, this rube recognized me from my performing days, even though I'd changed my looks. It was a high-stakes game, but the players weren't high-class. They ganged up on me, beat me, and then smashed my hands, one finger at a time, with a tire iron." More likely than not, this was a lie, and the detective was, setting him up. Suddenly Junior wished that he had denied dreaming..Now, since he didn't intend to date this woman again, he grabbed the only chance he might ever have to learn the intimate, eccentric details of her life. He began in her kitchen, with the contents of the refrigerator and cupboards, concluding his tour in her bedroom..By invoking the word emergency, Celestina was able quickly to reach her own physician in San Francisco. He agreed to treat Phimie and to have her admitted to St. Mary's upon her arrival from Oregon..Mary Lampion, little light, was home-schooled as her father and mother had been. But she didn't study just reading, writing, and arithmetic. Gradually she developed a range of fascinating talents not taught in any school, and she went exploring in a great number of the many ways things are, journeying to worlds right here but unseen..He backed toward the hall door, watching as the fire spread. After lingering until certain that the house would soon be a seething pyre, he finally sprinted along the hall to the front door.."You're the one who said your cold's just here. Maybe it stays in the kitchen, hoping it'll get a piece of pie." For just one hour, which was not too taxing, he walked in the idea of a world where he had healthy eyes, and shared the vision of other Barty's in other places, so he would be able to see his bride as she walked down the aisle and as, beside him, she took their vows with him, and as she held out her hand to receive the ring.."I mean it. You have a lot of responsibilities here. Barty. Pie Lady Services. People who depend on you. Friends who love you. When you came on board with me, mister, you bought into a whole lot more than you can walk away from."

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