

GULP ADVENTURES ON THE ALIMENTARY CANAL

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sometimes detail with detail, so it could be great for you and your entire life. Dr. Chan's manner remained professional, providing the strength that Agnes required, but his pain was evident when his gentle voice softened further: "These tumors are so advanced, we won't know until surgery if the malignancy has spread. We may already be too late. And if we aren't too late, we'll have only a small window of opportunity. A small window. Eight days would entail too much risk." He didn't rely, either, on a sixth sense to detect obstacles or open spaces, which some blind people claimed to have. Sometimes instinct told him that in his path was an object that ordinarily would not have been there; but as often as not, it went undetected, and unless he was using his cane, he tripped over it. The sixth sense was greatly overrated. Without sigh or complaint, he would walk back to her with the purse. The errand was no trouble. In fact, returning the purse would give him a chance to get another good-night kiss. In the city again, he stopped long enough to donate the raincoat to a homeless man who didn't notice the few odd stains. This pathetic hobo happily accepted the fine coat, donned it and then cursed his benefactor, spat at him, and threatened him with a claw hammer. With some sharp instrument, probably a knife, Cain had stabbed and gouged the red letters, working on the wall with such fury that two of the Bartholomews were barely readable anymore. The Sheetrock was marked by hundreds of scores and punctures. Junior glimpsed Vanadium first in profile and then, as the cop rode down and away, only the back of his head. He hadn't seen this man in almost three years, yet he was instantly certain that this was no coincidental look-alike. Here went the filthy-scabby-monkey spirit itself. "I don't know." He was silent a moment. "That's what's going to be interesting." The sound made by the dropping corpse indicated that cushioning trash lined the bottom of the bin, and also that it was no more than half full. This improved chances that Neddy wouldn't be discovered until a dump truck tumbled him into a landfill and even then perhaps no eyes would alight upon him again except those of hungry rats. Celestina expected to be taken to a waiting room, but instead the nun escorted her to surgical prep. Vanadium sat in the chair, watching. With the perfect control of a sleight-of-hand artist, he turned a quarter end-over-end across the knuckles of his right hand, palmed it with his thumb, caused it to reappear at his little finger, and rolled it across his knuckles again, ceaselessly. She got out of the cab and stood on the sidewalk in front of the gallery, her legs as shaky as those of a newborn colt. Golden lamplight gilded the front windows downstairs. He would sit with Victoria on the living-room sofa, sipping wine as they got to know each other. She might tell him to call her Vicky, and maybe he'd ask her to call him Eenie, the affectionate name Naomi had given him when he wouldn't tolerate Enoch. Soon, they would be necking like two crazy kids. Junior would disrobe her on the sofa, caressing her smooth pliant body, her skin buttery in the lamplight, and then he would carry her, naked, to the dark bedroom upstairs. He was prepared to find Vanadium sitting at the pine table, enjoying a cup of coffee. The kitchen was deserted. 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. "Then you have a big advantage, and you'll have to tell us all about yourselves," Agnes said. "I'll get the coffee brewing ... unless you'd like to help." Shortly after Agnes turned out the light, she said, "Kiddo, it's been one whole week since you walked where the rain wasn't, and I've been doing a lot of thinking about that." Every time Junior glanced back, Vanadium was following his wake through the throng. Stocky but almost gliding. Grim and grimmer. Hideous. And closer. Room by room, closet by closet, Junior conducted a search for the detective. The cop was not here. As beautiful as they were, none of these women satisfied him as profoundly as Naomi had satisfied him. And so at the age of thirty-one, after more than twenty-eight years of blindness with a few short reprieves, Barty Lampion received the gift of sight from his ten-year-old daughter. 1996 through 2000: Day after day, the work was done in memory of Agnes Lampion, Joey Lampion, Harrison White, Seraphim White, Jacob Isaacson, Simon Magusson, Tom Vanadium, Grace White, and most recently Wally Lipscomb, in memory of all those who had given so much and, though perhaps still alive in other places, were gone from here. At best, Vanadium might decide Junior had come here to learn what other funeral his nemesis had attended—which was, in fact, the true motivation. But this made it clear that Junior feared him and was striving to stay one step ahead of him. Innocent men didn't go to such length. As far as the fruitcake cop was concerned, Junior might as well have painted I killed Naomi on his forehead. As Junior was about to knock again, the door flew inward, and over Sinatra having fun with "When My Sugar Walks Down the Street," Victoria said, "You're early, I didn't hear your car—" She was speaking as she pulled the door open, and she cut herself off in midsentence when she stepped up to the threshold and saw who stood before her. If he was left standing on the porch, the visitor would circle the house, peering in windows where the drapes were not drawn, trying the doors in hope of finding one unlocked. Fearful that Victoria was sick or injured, that perhaps she had slipped on a pat of butter and cracked her head against the corner of an open oven door, he might try to force his way inside, break a window. Certainly he would go to the neighbors to call the police. On one wall hung an impressive array of gardening tools. In the corner was a potting bench. "That was five years ago. After more surgeries than I care to remember, I was left with these." He raised his goblin hands again. "There's pain in humid weather, less when it's dry. I can take care of myself, but I'll never be a card mechanic again ... or a magician." This Detroit-built gondola would swiftly navigate the Styx without a black-robed gondolier to pole it onward. Until Nolly, Kathleen's life had been as short on romance as a saltless saltine is short on flavor. Her childhood and even her adolescence were so colorless that she'd settled on dentistry as a career because it seemed, by comparison to what she knew, to be an exotic and exciting profession. She'd dated a few men, but all were boring and none was kind. Ballroom-dancing lessons and ultimately competitions promised the romance that dentistry and dating hadn't provided, but even dancing was somewhat a disappointment until her instructor introduced Kathleen to this balding, bull-necked, lumpy, utterly wonderful Romeo. Frequently, people told Agnes that she should find an agent for Barty, as he was wonderfully photogenic; modeling and acting careers, they assured her, were his for the asking. Though her son was indeed a fine-looking lad, Agnes knew he wasn't as exceptionally handsome as many perceived him to be. Rather than his looks, what made Barty so appealing, what made him seem extraordinarily good-looking, were other qualities: an unusual gracefulness for a child, such a physical easiness in every movement and posture that it seemed as though some curious personal relationship with time had allowed him twenty years to become a three-year-old; an unfailingly affable temperament and quick smile that possessed his entire face, including his mesmerizing green blue eyes. Perhaps most affecting of all, his remarkable good health was expressed in the lustrous sheen of his thick hair, in the golden-pink glow of his summer-touched skin, in every physical aspect of him, until there were times when he seemed radiant. With a cry of alarm, he bolted to the bathroom and made it with not a second to spare. He seemed to be on the throne long enough to have witnessed the rise and fall of an empire. "Me, I don't like anything old. This White chick's got a weird thing for old people, old buildings, old stuff in general. Like she doesn't realize she's young. You want to grab her, shake her,

and say, 'Hey, let's move on,' you know?". He wasn't required to torture himself in search of pleasant conversation with those they visited. Agnes had virtually invented pleasant conversation.. This was not the time to ponder the nature of the relationship between the treacherous Miss Bressler and Vanadium. Junior had a bloody trail to cover, and precious time was ticking away.. Slowly rotating his raised hands before his eyes, as if he saw them young and supple-fingered, the magician described the amazing manipulations that a master card mechanic could perform. Though he spoke without flash or filigree, he made these feats of skill sound more sorcerous than hares from hats, doves from scarves, and blondes bisected by buzz saws.. Celestina had no illusions about playing detective. She would never be able to track down the bastard, and she had no stomach for confronting him.. A music tradition was deeply rooted in the Negro community. No similar tradition in magic existed.. pride, his one great shining moment but also his sinful pride. Clubbed with the trophy first, fists later. And now, here.. Although he was seventy-six, Tom still worked for Pie Lady Services. They had no set retirement age for staff, and Father Tom expected to die at his work. "And if it's a pie-caravan day, just leave my old carcass where I drop until you make all the deliveries. I won't be responsible for anyone missing a promised pie." Now, however, he was thinking not about what Agnes's story might mean to Reverend White, but about what the minister might be able to do to provide at least a small degree of comfort to Agnes, who spent her life comforting others.. "Does my dad like Christmas?" Barty asked, sitting on the grave grass in front of the headstone.. With his refreshed drink, studying Celestina's photograph in the brochure, Junior returned to the living room. She was as stunning as her sister, but unlike her poor sister, she wasn't dead and was, therefore, an appealing prospect for romance. From her, he must learn whatever she knew that might help him in the Bartholomew hunt, without alerting her to his motive. At the same time, there was no reason that they couldn't have a fling, a love affair, even a serious future together.. 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.. Junior poured half the vodka over the corpse, splashed some around other parts of the kitchen, and spilled the last on the cook top, where it trickled toward the active burner. This was not an ideal accelerant, not as effective as gasoline, but by the time he threw the bottle aside, the spirits found the flame.. In a pew in Old St. Mary's Church, in Chinatown, Junior took delivery of the lock-release gun and the untraceable 9-mm pistol with the custom-machined silencer, as previously arranged. The church was deserted at ten o'clock in the morning. The shadowy interior and the menacing religious figures gave him the creeps.. Here, now, the dinner guest, entering the kitchen. He carried the wineglass and the rose in his left hand. The Merlot was tucked under his arm. In his right hand was a small, brightly wrapped gift box.. Tom removed the lid. No beer, one head. Simon Magusson's severed head lay faceup on the ice, mouth open as though he were standing in court to object to the prosecution's line of questioning.. "He knew how you felt about having too much life insurance. So he didn't disclose it to you." 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.. A SEVERE THIRST INDICATED to Agnes that she wasn't dead. There would be no thirst in paradise.. At the farthest end of the loft from the stereo speakers, voices nevertheless had to be raised in even the most intimate exchanges. The artist who had created In the Baby's Brain Lies the Parasite of Doom, Version 6, however, possessed a voice as deep, sharp-edged, and penetrating as his talent.. Because of her occasional bad dreams, Angel chose to sleep now and then in her mother's bed instead of in her own room, and this was one of those nights.. "And how about this," he continued. "Every point in the universe is directly connected to every other point, regardless of distance, so any point on Mars is, in some mysterious way, as close to me as is any of you. Which means it's possible for information-and objects, even people-to move instantly between here and London without wires or microwave transmission. In fact, between here and a distant star, instantly. We just haven't figured out how to make it happen. Indeed, on a deep structural level, every point in the universe is the same point. This interconnectedness is so complete that a great flock of birds taking flight in Tokyo, disturbing the air with their wings, contributes to weather changes in Chicago." Although the ace of hearts had only positive meanings, and although, according to Maria, multiple appearances, especially in sequence, meant increasingly positive things, a series of chills nevertheless riffled through Agnes's spine, as if her vertebrae were fingers shuffling.. Worse, to make credible his anguish and to avoid suspicion, he would have to play the devastated widower for at least another couple weeks, perhaps for as long as a month. As a dedicated follower of the self-improvement advice of Dr. Caesar Zedd, Junior was impatient with those who were ruled by sentimentality and by the expectations of society, and now he was required to pretend to be one of them-and for an interminable period of time.. The voice continued, issuing from a device that stood on the desk beside the phone. "Please don't bang up. This is a telephone answering machine. Leave a message after you hear the tone, and I will return your call later." "Don't get me started on cyclones!" Edom hurried through the house and out to the station wagon, to fetch the boxes of groceries.. 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." "Seems like," Vanadium agreed. "So a man like Cain obsesses on one thing after another-sex, money, food, power, drugs, alcohol, anything that seems to give meaning to his days, but that requires no real self-discovery or self-sacrifice. Briefly, he feels complete. However, there's no substance to what he's filled himself with, so it soon evaporates, and then he's empty again." He was still her boy. As always, her boy. Bartholomew. Barty. Her sweetie. Her kiddo.. Inevitably, he had to wonder if Naomi had kept her pregnancy secret because, indeed, she suspected that the child wasn't her husband's.. Sitting on a stool at the counter, he ordered a cheeseburger, coleslaw, french fries, and a cherry Coke.. He did not answer Hound's question.. By the time he went to bed Saturday night, the cards that had been only that morning were showing signs of wear.. WEDNESDAY, fully two days after delivering honey-raisin pear pies with Agnes, Edom worked up the nerve to visit Jacob.. A nuclear-powered sound system blasted out the Doors, Jefferson Airplane, the Mamas and the Papas, Strawberry Alarm Clock, Country Joe and the Fish, the Lovin' Spoonful, Donovan (unfortunately), the Rolling Stones (annoyingly), and the Beatles (infuriatingly). Megatons of music crashed off the brick walls, made the many-paned metal framed windows reverberate like the drumheads in a hard-marching military band, and created simultaneously an exhilarating sense of possibility and a sense of doom, the feeling that Armageddon was coming soon but that it was going to be fun.. This room didn't face the street by which Cain would approach the building, so Vanadium switched on the lights. He spent fifteen minutes examining the mundane contents of the cupboards, searching for nothing in particular, merely getting an idea of how the suspect lived-and, admittedly, hoping for an item as helpful to a conviction as a severed head in the refrigerator or at least a plastic-wrapped kilo of marijuana in the freezer.. "--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." Although the only light on the back porch came from the pale beams that filtered out through the curtains on the kitchen windows, all these faces seemed luminous, almost preternaturally aglow, like the kiln-fired countenances of saints in a dark church, lit solely by the flames of votive candles. The rain—a music of sorts, and the jasmine and incense, and the moment sacred. The voice had come not from the armchair in the corner, but from immediately beside the bed. Better still, he was able to have the girl to the accompaniment of her father's voice, which was even kinkier than doing her in the parsonage. When Junior rang the bell, Seraphim had been in her room, listening to a tape of a sermon her father was composing. The good reverend usually dictated a first draft, which his daughter then transcribed. For three hours, Junior went at her mercilessly, to the rhythms of her father's voice. The reverend's "presence" was deliciously perverse and stimulating to his sense of erotic invention. When Junior was finished, there was nothing sexual that Seraphim could ever do with a man that she had not learned from him. Barty's mathematical genius proved to have a valuable practical application. Even in his blindness, he perceived patterns where those with sight did not. Working with Tom Vanadium, he devised strikingly successful investment strategies based on subtleties of the stock market's historical performance. By the 1980s, the foundation's annual return on its endowment averaged twenty-six percent: excellent in light of the fact that the runaway inflation of the 1970s had been curbed. Fortunately, at least the desk was cigarette-scarred, because it came with the office. It had been the property of a skip-tracer named Otto Zelm, who'd made a good living at the kind of work Nolly avoided out of boredom: tracking down deadbeats and repossessing their vehicles. On a stakeout, Zelm fell asleep in his car, while smoking, thereby triggering the payoff of both life- and casualty-insurance policies, and freeing the lease on this furnished space. Startled, he braked to a halt. Agnes didn't say anything until Joey had taken three or four deep. Busily, earnestly, with great satisfaction, Junior redirected his anger at Celestina and at the man with her. These two were, after all, guardians of the true Bartholomew, and therefore Junior's enemies. No one was surprised by his proposal, her acceptance, and the wedding. Barty and Angel were both eighteen when they were married in June of 1983. Memory of the Spartan decor of Thomas Vanadium's house lingered with Junior, and he addressed his living space with the detective's style in mind. He installed a minimum of furniture, though all new and of higher quality than the junk in Vanadium's residence: sleek, modern, Danish-pecan wood and nappy oatmeal-colored upholstery. THE MORNING THAT it happened was bright and blue in March, two months after Barty took Angel for a dry walk in wet weather, seven weeks after Celestina married Wally, and five weeks after the happy newlyweds completed their purchase of the Galloway house next door to the Lampion place. Selma Galloway, retired from a professorship years earlier, had subsequently retired further, taking advantage of the equity in her long-owned home to buy a little condo on the beach in nearby Carlsbad. Edom and Jacob flanked the gurney, each gripping one of Barty's feet through the sheet that covered them, escorting him with the same stony determination that you saw on the faces of the Secret Service agents who bracketed the President of the United States. When he came to himself, sick and weak from the poison and with an aching skull, he was in a room with brick walls and bricked-up windows. The door had no bars and no visible lock. But when he tried to get to his feet he felt bonds of sorcery holding his body and mind, resilient, clinging, tightening as he moved. He could stand, but could not take a step towards the door. He could not even reach his hand out. It was a horrible sensation, as if his muscles were not his own. He sat down again and tried to hold still. The spellbonds around his chest kept him from breathing deeply, and his mind felt stifled too, as if his thoughts were crowded into a space too small for them. Symptoms of food poisoning usually appear within two hours of dining. The hideous intestinal spasms had rocked him at least six hours after he'd eaten. Besides, if the culprit were food poisoning, he would have vomited; but he hadn't felt any urge to spew. Onto its roof now, the Pontiac spun as it slid, grinding loudly against the blacktop, and regardless of how determinedly Agnes held on, she was being pulled out of her seat, toward the inverted ceiling and also backward. Her forehead knocked hard into the thin overhead padding, and her back wrenched against the headrest. Junior had hoped not to be recognized by anyone at this affair. He regretted that he hadn't stuck to his original plan, maintaining surveillance of the gallery from his parked car. While always Agnes held fast to hope, she knew that easy hope was usually false hope, and she didn't allow herself to speculate, even briefly, that his problem had resolved itself. Other symptoms—halos and rainbows—had disappeared for a time, only to return. "You look very, very handsome this morning, Mr. Barty," squeaked Pixie Lee, who was something of a flirt. "You look like a big movie star. He said, "There's a whiteness in Barty's right pupil ... which I think indicates a growth. The distortions in his vision are still there, though somewhat different, when he closes his right eye, so that indicates a problem in the left, as well, even though I'm not able to see anything there. Dr. Chan has a full schedule tomorrow, but as a favor to me, he's going to see you before his usual office hours, first thing in the morning. You'll have to start out early." Maintaining a brutal strangling pressure, Junior turned his head aside, to protect his eyes. He kned Neddy in the crotch, crunching the remaining fight out of him. She didn't have an appetite, anyway. Joey was too much on her mind. The safe birth of a healthy child was a blessing, but it wasn't compensation for her loss. Although by nature resistant to depression, she now had a darkness in her heart that would not relent before a thousand dawns or ten thousand. If a mere nurse had insisted that she eat, Agnes would not have been persuaded, but she couldn't hold out against the insistent importuning of one special seamstress. More than once, a passing nurse stopped to check on him and to advise him not to exhaust himself. The rain was colder than it had been earlier, almost as icy as sleet. Or perhaps she was far hotter than before and felt the chill more keenly on her fevered skin. Each droplet seemed to hiss against her face, to sizzle against her hands, with which she tightly gripped her swollen abdomen as if she could deny Death the baby that it had come to collect. Seeing her, Joey leaped up front his armchair again. He managed to hold on to his book this time, but he stumbled into the footstool and nearly lost his balance.

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