

ALEXANDER POPE AND THE TRADITIONS OF FORMAL VERSE SATIRE

Grace dropped the phone. Harrison let the frosting knife slip out of his fingers..He used the kitchen phone, at the comer secretary. The blood had been cleaned up long ago, of course, and the minor damage from the ricocheting bullet had been repaired..The moment that the roof of the car vanished beneath the water, Junior hurried away, retracing on foot the route he had driven. He didn't have to go all the way back to Vanadium's place, only to the dark house where he'd left Victoria Bressler. He had a date with a dead woman..A sudden strange weakness, a formless dread, dropped Agnes out of her crouch and onto her knees beside the boy.. "Sometimes it's sad here, Mommy. But it's not sad every place you are. Lots of places, Daddy's with you and me, and we're happier, and everything's okay."..Yet in her heart, she wouldn't relinquish hope for a miracle. This was an amazing boy, a prodigy, a boy who could walk where the rain wasn't, already himself a miracle, and it seemed that anything might happen, that Dr. Chan might suddenly rush into the waiting room, surgical mask dangling from his neck, face aglow, with news of a spontaneous rejection of the cancer..The boy never mentioned what he'd done, and his mother ceased worrying about him falling out of bed..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..For a moment, Junior was mystified. Vanadium's movements had the quality of ritual, vaguely reminiscent of a priest raising high the Eucharist.. "It's even worse," Junior rasped, convinced that he was losing some indefinable advantage if the cop left without playing out this moment as it would usually unfold in an intellectual television crime drama like Perry Mason or Peter Gunn..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..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..Besides, Junior was reluctant to kill Vanadium, for real this time, and risk discovering- that the detective's filthy-scabby-monkey spirit would in fact prove to be a relentless haunting presence that gave him no peace.. "Cancer," he said, because that was more tragic and far less suspicious than a fall from a fire tower..From a distance and through a scattering of trees, Junior wasn't able to discern much about the other funeral, but he was pretty sure many if not most of that crowd were Negroes. He surmised, therefore, that the person being buried was a Negro, too..Striving to appear casual, but obviously unnerved, the pencil-thin man backed off again. "The paintings are lovely, wonderful, I'm enormously impressed. I'm a friend of the artist's, you know. She was a tenant of mine, I was her landlord during her early college years, in her salad days, a nice little studio apartment, before the baby. A lovely girl, I always knew she'd be a success, it was so apparent in even her earliest work. I just had to come tonight, even though a friend's covering two of my four sets. I couldn't miss this.".. "But you wouldn't be willing to use that skill in the King's service?"..As a homicide detective, Vanadium had a career-spanning ninety eight percent closure-and-conviction record on the cases he handled. Once convinced he had found the guilty party, he didn't rely solely on solid police work. He augmented the usual investigative procedures and techniques with his own brand of psychological warfare-sometimes subtle, sometimes not-which frequently encouraged the perpetrator to make mistakes that convicted him.. "Naomi--she popped out of my oven twenty years ago, not out of yours," Sheena continued in a fierce whisper. "If anyone's suffering here, it's me, not you. Who're you, anyway? Some guy who's been boinking her for a couple years, that's all you are. I'm her mother. You can never know my pain. And if you don't stand with this family to make these wankers pay up big-time, I'll personally cut your balls off while you're sleeping and feed them to my cat."..For a finder's fee, Junior was put in touch with a papermaker named Google. This was not his real name, but with his crossed eyes, large rubbery lips, and massively prominent Adam's apple, he was as perfect a Google as ever there had been..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..Surprisingly, dolls. Quite a few dolls. Apparently the bastard boy was effeminate, a quality he sure as hell hadn't inherited from his father..Imagination like all living things lives now, and it lives with, from, on true change. Like all we do and have, it can be co-opted and degraded; but it survives commercial and didactic exploitation. The land outlasts the empires. The conquerors may leave desert where there was forest and meadow, but the rain will fall, the rivers will run to the sea. The unstable, mutable, untruthful realms of Once-upon-a-time are as much a part of human history and thought as the nations in our kaleidoscopic atlases, and some are more enduring..Of course, he had the Pinchbeck and Gammoner identities waiting, two escape hatches. But he didn't want to use them. He liked his life on Russian Hill, and he was loath to leave it.. "It's there even when you read to me now. The sad feeling, I mean. It changes the story, makes it not as good, because I can't pretend I don't hear how sad you are."..An SFPD patrol car swept past, its siren silent, the rack of emergency beacons flashing on its roof..For the past two days, Junior had eaten only binding foods, and late this afternoon, he had taken a preventive dose of paregoric, as well..He didn't bother to press Vanadium's hand around the weapon. There wasn't going to be a wealth of evidence for the Scientific Investigation Division to sift through, anyway, when the fire was finally put out: just enough charred clues to allow them an easy conclusion..Vanadium understood the depth of his old friend's pain, and he knew that the anguish over the loss of a child could make the best of men act out of emotion rather than good judgment, and so he accepted Harrison's preference to let the matter rest. When enough time passed for

reflection, what Vanadium ultimately decided was that of the two of them, Harrison was much the stronger in his faith, and that he himself, perhaps for the rest of his life, would be more comfortable behind a badge than behind a Roman collar. Junior was flattered, he really was. Women couldn't get enough of him. The story of his life. They never let go gracefully. He was wanted, needed, adored, worshiped. Women kept calling after they should have taken the hint and gone away, insisted on sending him notes and gifts even after he told them it was over. Junior wasn't surprised that women would return from the dead for him, nor was he surprised that women he'd killed would try to find a route back to him from Beyond, without malice, without vengeance in their hearts, merely yearning to be with him again, to hold him and to fulfill his needs. As gratified as he was by this tribute to his desirability, he simply didn't have any romantic feelings left for Naomi and Seraphim. They were the past, and he loathed the past, and if they wouldn't let him alone, he would never be able to live in the future. The reception still roared in both showrooms of the gallery. Legions of the uncultured, taste-challenged in every regard except in their appreciation for hors d'oeuvres, yammered about art and chased their cloddish opinions with mediocre champagne. Agnes was not fully aware of how she was lifted from the car, but she remembered looking back and seeing Joey's body huddled in the tangled shadows of the wreckage, remembered reaching toward him, desperate for the anchorage that he had always given her, and then she was on the gurney and moving. Rowena loves you, Phimie had told him, briefly repressing the effects of her stroke to speak with clarity. Beezil and Feezil are safe with her Messages from his lost wife and children, where they waited for him beyond this life. Writing came with reading, and in a notebook, he began to make entries about points of interest in the stories that he enjoyed. His Diary of a Book Reader, as he titled it, fascinated Agnes, who read it with his permission; these notes to himself were enthusiastic, earnest, and charming-but literally month by month, Agnes noticed that they grew less naive, more complex, more contemplative. "And maybe," said Agnes, caught up in the speculation, "when your life comes to an end in all those many branches, what you're finally judged on is the shape and the beauty of the tree." Even Barty seemed to be attentive, but Angel happily applied crayons to a coloring book and hummed softly to herself. Paul in the guest room again. Sweeping a bedside lamp to the floor, lifting the nightstand. Spruce Hills, but also those in the entire county, maybe seventy or eighty thousand. His mother, gently pushing Tom to the prime view point at the head of the stairs, seemed unconcerned about her child's venture into the storm. There was an otter in our brook. Junior hurried out of the kitchen and along the hallway to the front door. He ran silently, landing on his toes like a dancer. His natural athletic grace was one of the things that drew so many women to him. Breath repeatedly catching in her throat, heart thudding, Agnes watched her son through the open car door. Repressing a smirk, feigning a respectful solemnity, he dared to glance at Vanadium, but the detective stared into Naomi's grave as though he hadn't heard the mockery-or, having heard it, didn't recognize it for what it was. 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. Sometimes Barty could be fierce in his independence-his mother told him so-and now he rebuffed Angel too sharply. "I don't want to be waited on. I'm not helpless, you know. I can get sodas myself" By the time he reached the doorway, he felt sorry for his tone, and he looked back toward where the window seat must be. "Angel?" First, he searched immediately around the dead man, figuring that the watch might still be snared on the coat belt or on one of the sleeve straps. No luck. That last part was true. He just wasn't loose in this world anymore. And in the world to which he'd gone, he would not find easy victims. Aware of the mortician's new edginess, Jacob was convinced that his initial distrust of Panglo was justified. This twitchy little guy seemed to have something to hide. Jacob didn't have to be a cop to recognize nervousness born of guilt. He turned the knob. The door eased inward, but he pushed it open only a fraction of an inch. 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. The driver's door opened, shoving aside a damaged tea table, and a man climbed out of the Pontiac. Too far from Spruce Hills to be a popular make-out spot for teenagers, Quarry Lake was a turnoff for young lovers also because it had a reputation as haunted territory. Over five decades, four quarry workers had died in mining accidents. County lore included stories of ghosts roaming the depths of the excavation before it was flooded-and subsequently the shoreline, after the lake was filled. Trembling, she sat beside the bassinet and gazed at her baby with such love that the force of it ought to have rocked him awake. Leaning forward from his armchair, white hair as radiant as the wings of cherubim, Obadiah waved one misshapen hand over the deck, never closer than ten inches to the cards. "Now please spread them out in a fan on the table, facedown." 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 birthmarked man identified himself as Detective Thomas Vanadium. He did not use the familiar, diminutive form of his name, as had the doctor, and his voice was as uninflected as his face was flat and homely. These statements sounded so convoluted and so bizarre to Agnes that they nourished her growing fear for Barty's mental stability. "They've gone to bed. They're tired," Wally told her as he put the car in gear and released the hand brake. "Aren't you?" "I already told you-anything in your heart is as easy to read as the open page of a book." Thick fog distorted all sense of time and place. At each end of the block, pearly hazes of light marked intersections with main streets but didn't illuminate this narrower passage in between. A few security lamps-bare bulbs under inverted-saucer

shades or caged in wire--indicated the delivery entrances of some businesses, but the dense white shrouds veiled and diffused these, as well, until they were no brighter than gaslights..The can struck Junior hard in the face, breaking his nose, before he could duck..Those spike-sharp eyes, -tenpenny gray, nailed Junior to the bed, pinning him for scrutiny..Now came a slight but real risk of being heard inside: He pulled the trigger. The flat steel spring in the lock-release gun caused the pick to jump upward, lodging some of the pins at the shear line. The snap of the hammer against the spring and the click of the pick against the pin tumblers were soft sounds, but anyone near the other side of the door would more likely than not hear them; if she was one room removed, however, the noise would not reach her.."I don't have to graduate in the spring of next year. I can take fewer classes, graduate the spring after. That's no big deal."..Head lowered, as if his visit to Jacob were a weight that bowed him, his attention was on the ground. Otherwise, he might not have noticed, might not have been halted by, the intricate and beautiful pattern of sunlight and shadow over which he walked..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..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..Here again were these peculiar grammatical constructions, which sometimes she had thought were just the mistakes that even a prodigy could be expected to make, and which sometimes she had interpreted as expressions of fanciful speculations, but which lately she had suspected were of a more complex-and perhaps darker-nature. Now her dread took form, and she wondered if the personality disorders that had shaped her brothers' lives could have roots not just in the abuse they had taken from their father, but also in a twisted genetic legacy that could manifest again in her son. In spite of his great gifts, Barty might be destined for a life limited by a psychological problem of a unique or at least different-nature, first suggested by these occasional conversations that seemed not fully coherent..Glaring and red-faced, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, Neddy said, "I'm sorry, but you've got me all wrong. I'm not like Renee and you."..Because he kept imagining the stealthy sounds of a dead cop rising in vengeance behind him, Junior switched on the radio. He tuned in a station featuring a Top 40 countdown..He couldn't work up sufficient saliva to get the rasp out of his voice: "Then you could learn to do it."..Maybe it's not where the heart is," Wally corrected himself. "Maybe it's where the buffalo roam."..That was another thing. Junior hadn't gotten his noon meal, because the spirit of Vanadium had nearly caught up with him when he'd been browsing for tie chains and silk pocket squares before lunch. Then he missed dinner, as well, because he had to maintain surveillance on Celestina when she didn't go straight home from the gallery. He was hungry. He was starving. This, too, she had done to him. The bitch..He realized that like so many women, Seraphim wanted it, asked for it-yet had no place in her self-image to accommodate the truth that she was sexually aggressive. She wanted to think of herself as shy, demure, virginal, as innocent as a minister's daughter ought to be which meant that to get what she wanted, she required Junior to be a brute. He was happy to oblige..Slow deep breaths. Per Zedd, slow deep breaths. Any state of anxiety, regardless of how powerful, could be ameliorated or even dissipated..Yet, with no recollection of rising from his chair, he found that he had shouldered his backpack and crossed the room. The three men looked up expectantly..The apartment above Elena's Fashions could be reached by a set of exterior stairs at the back of the building. The climb had never before taxed Agnes in the least, but now it took away her breath and left her legs trembling by the time she reached the top landing..slow breaths, and then she pointed at the windshield. "The hospital's that way."..The coin stopped turning across his knuckles and, as though with volition of its own, it slipped into the tight curve of his curled forefinger. With a snap of his thumb, he flipped the quarter into the air..He looked up into the eyes of the stocky man with the birthmark. They were gray eyes, hard as nail heads, but clear and surprisingly beautiful in that otherwise unfortunate face.."I've seen them," Tom assured her. "My dear, you've never smelled anything better than a field full of bacon vines."..She must have sensed his assessment of her and realized that she had little chance of charming him, for she turned at once away and never looked in his direction again..Quickly, he searched for the source, but in less than a minute, before he could trace the voice, it faded away. Unlike that night in December, this time the singing didn't resume..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."..All right, yes, it had tiny hands and tiny feet, rather than hooked talons and cloven..break and conversation among the customers fell into a lull. When the bar phone rang, though it was muted, he heard it at his table..Junior had no idea who the driver of the Buick might be, but he hated the tall lanky son of a bitch because he figured the guy was humping Celestina, who would never have humped anyone but Junior if she had met him first, because like her sister, like all women, she would find him irresistible. He felt that he had a prior claim on her because of his relationship to the family; he was the father of her sister's bastard boy, after all, which made him their blood by shared--progeny..Immediately at the thought of regurgitation, his abdominal muscles contracted like those of a laboratory frog zapped by an electric current, and he choked on a rising horror..LATE TUESDAY AFTERNOON in Bright Beach, as a darker blue and iridescent tide rolled across the sky, seagulls rowed toward their safe harbors, and on the land below, shadows that had been upright at work all day now stretched out, recumbent, preparing for the night..Grace, Celestina, and Paul expressed amusement and amazement at Angel's critical judgment..Finished, she gave him a mirror, so he could admire his new bicuspid cap. After five years of dentistry, paced so as not to tax Nolly's tolerance, Kathleen had done well what nature had done poorly, giving him a perfect bite and a supernatural smile. This final cap was the last of the reconstruction..When Victoria finally calmed her racing heart, she returned the spoon to the tray on the nightstand, stoppered the carafe, and said, "That's enough for

now, Mr. Cain. In your condition, even too much I melted ice might trigger renewed vomiting." 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. Junior couldn't imagine why some Negro stranger would want to intrude. He hoped there wouldn't be trouble. As the storm failed to dampen Joey, so the rotating red-and-white beacons on the surrounding police vehicles did not touch him. The "I hope it will," the physician said, but his emphasis was too solidly on the word hope. "—and whenever the good Pharaoh was here in San Francisco, a few times each year, he always stopped by St. Anselmo's to entertain the boys—" "It's an uncommon reaction," the physician acknowledged, "but not so uncommon as to be rare." Two teenage boys and one elderly woman scrambled across the sidewalk, grabbing at the ringing rain of quarters. They caught some, but others bounced and twirled through their grasping fingers, rolling-spinning away into the gutter. "You know where it comes from," her mother said with a yawn that betrayed her exhaustion after a night with no sleep and too much drama. 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. She switched on the windshield wipers. Repeatedly, in the arc of cleared glass, the graveyard was revealed in sharp detail, and yet the place remained less than fully familiar to her. Her whole world had been changed by Barty's dry walk in wet weather. The floor, on a silk-covered pillow filled with goose down. With a sigh he assumed the lotus position: spine straight, legs crossed, hands at rest with the palms up. Although rain-pasted to her skin, the fine hairs rose on the nape of her neck. The gooseflesh crawling across her arms had nothing to do with her cold, wet clothes. His breath was warm against her throat: "And I want to go back home to see some faces." Maria fished another chip from the sweating carafe, rejected it, and scooped out a larger piece. She hesitated, staring at it for a moment, and then spooned it between Agnes's lips. "Water can be broken if it will be first made into ice." 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. "There's no clear evidence of birth defects, but a couple tests reveal some worrisome anomalies. We'll know when we see the child." The ball of sodden Kleenex was gripped so tightly in Junior's left hand that had its carbon content been higher, it would have been compacted into a diamond. He saw Vanadium staring at his clenched fist and sharp white knuckles. He tried to ease up on the wad of Kleenex, but he wasn't able to relent. So runs the water away. Back in January, when he received the disappointing report from Nolly Wulfstan, Junior was not convinced that the private detective had exercised due diligence in his investigation. He suspected that Wulfstan's ugliness was matched by his laziness. When she complimented him on being such a good little soldier, abiding his cold with no complaint, he shrugged. Without looking up from the coloring book, he said, "It's just here." A stab of horror punctured Celestina as she failed to repress a mental image of a carnival-sideshow monster, half dragon and half insect, coiled in her sister's womb. She hated the rapist's child but was appalled by her hatred, for the baby was blameless. For her, the suspense that grew throughout dinner didn't have much to do with whether or not Wally would pop the question, because if he didn't broach the subject this time, she intended to take the initiative. Instead, Celestina was more tense about whether or not Wally expected that a heartfelt expression of commitment should be sufficient to induce her to sleep with him. "I wish my Rico could have met your Harrison, too," Maria told Grace, referring to the husband who had abandoned her. "Maybe the reverend could've done with words what I couldn't do with my foot in Rico's trasero." Occasionally, 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. That saving smile once more returned lost harmony to the scarred and broken face. "Not me. From my perspective, psychology is just one more of those easy sources of false meaning—like sex, money, and drugs. But I will admit to knowing a thing or two about evil." "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." As the paramedic shoved the gurney across the step-notched bumper, its collapsible legs scissored down. Agnes was rolled headfirst into the ambulance. After a bit Otter nodded left, away from the grey stone tower. They walked on towards a long, treeless valley, past grass-grown dumps and tailings. "Look at it this way, Aggie. All the pies, all the things you do—that's betting on life. And now you've just been given the great blessing of being able to place larger bets." Agnes prepared a dinner to indulge him: hot dogs with cheese, potato chips. Root beer instead of milk. 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. The wife killer was evil; and his evil would be expressed one way or another, regardless of the forces that affected his actions. If he'd not killed Naomi on the fire tower, he would have killed her elsewhere, when another opportunity for enrichment presented itself. If Victoria hadn't become a victim, some other woman would have died instead. If Cain hadn't become obsessed with the strange conviction that someone named Bartholomew might be the death of him, he would have filled his hollow heart with an equally strange obsession that might have led him, anyway, to Celestina, but that would surely have brought violence down on someone else if not on her. pride, his one great shining moment but also his sinful pride. Clubbed with the trophy first, fists later. And now, here. Two high-quality deadbolt locks. Sufficient protection against the average intruder, but inadequate to keep out a self-improved man with channeled anger. 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. "Veal fit for kings," said their waiter, delivering the entrees, and one taste confirmed his promise. Cradling the baby, the nun turned with it to Celestina, folding back a thin blanket to present her with a good look at the tiny girl. Deeply distressed that he was planning the funeral of a man as young as Joe Lampion, whom he had liked and admired,

Panglo paused to express his disbelief and to murmur comforting words, more to himself than to Jacob, as each decision was made. With one hand on the chosen casket, he said, "Unbelievable, a traffic accident, and on the very day his son is born. So sad. So terribly sad." After nudging the door shut with his shoulder, Barty carried the sodas out of the kitchen and forward along the hall. Pausing at the livingroom archway, he said, "Uncle Jacob?" She appeared to be in her early thirties, perhaps six years older than Junior, but he didn't hold that against her. He wasn't any more prejudiced against older people than he was against people of other races and ethnic origins. The owner's attitude softened somewhat with Junior's reference to the quarter, and softened even further when together they returned to the counter to see the proof in the cheese. He went from righteous anger to abject apology. Though they had expected the cause of the explosion, both Paul and Harrison were halted by shock at the sight of all this ruination. They had expected to find the car jammed into the wall of the house, never this far inside. The speed required to penetrate this distance into the structure beggared Paul's skills of calculation and made him wonder if even recklessness and alcohol were sufficient to produce, such a catastrophe. Six captain's chairs encircled the big round table, one for everybody, including Agnes, but only Paul and Barty stayed seated. "Some Baptists are opposed to drink, Doctor, but we're the wicked variety. Though all we have is a warm bottle of Chardonnay." He was immensely weary, limp. He felt oppressed, as though a great weight were piled on him. Even keeping his eyes open was tiring. "I believe I'll just wait here until Mr. Cain wakes," Vanadium said. "I've nothing more pressing to do." The telephone was operative, and Vanadium dialed the number of the building superintendent, Sparky Vox. Sparky had an apartment in the basement, on the upper of two subterranean floors, adjacent to the garage entrance. Darker than water, another stain spread across the lap and down the legs of the pants. It was the color of port wine when filtered through the gray fabric of the jogging suit, but even in her semi-delirious state, she knew that she was not the vessel for a miracle birth, was not bringing forth a baby in a flush of wine, but in a gush of blood.

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