

matters familiar



e. g. fabricant

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ISBN: 0615727042
ISBN-13: 9780615727042

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011917205

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Cover designed by E. G. Fabricant

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Printed in the United States of America

DEDICATION

For Frank and Betty, for the gifts of life and love—theirs,
mine, and ours—and
For M. A.; BeeEss; Tomiss; Jerome; J. L.; Fuffy; and The
Brat, for helping me fill in the blanks.

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4 Gemini



Flowers, candles, incense. Context is everything.

The thought promoted itself from vagrant to insight as Jim traced the outline of his oxblood brogans against the dull, gray veins of the cathedral's marble floor. Altar-boyhood artifacts that transubstantiated into adult talismans of sensual carnality became the stuff of Gothic nightmares again, as he stood there. Smoke curled lazily out of the thurifer being dangled by a somnambulant acolyte. *Christ. Twenty years of smoking and that crap still makes me dizzy.*

"What do you think he's going to say?" she hissed. Jim looked at Laura, the baby, as his little brother, Cary—all six-and-a-half feet of him—embraced the rostrum. The meadow of blue, gray, and oddly strawberry heads that had known them all as children stirred slightly, as if anticipating a chilly gust—fed, no doubt, each by their own recollections of the rocky history between mother and son. Laura's chrome-blue eyes summarized her, and their, concern. So did her fingers, tamping her notes to her silk-covered

thigh. Jim's were already pocketed, him having led the tribute. Candle flames jumped and bowed spastically at the corners of his vision.

"Not a goddamned clue," he whispered.

Cary had no notes. He stood, feet apart, and stared hard at the dull silver casket under the floral sprays—his Superman to her Lex Luthor—to satisfy himself she was truly vanquished, and her Kryptonite of passive aggression entombed with her.

"Good-bye, Mother."



There they stood together, again, at the edge of what was weakly called a wake by such as themselves, two generations removed from the authentic. The lack of a propped-up stiff with coins on the eyes was a bargain, maybe even a blessing. Even a medium-watt look from the old girl while alive could etch glass at a considerable distance. Cary had bailed and planted his glass and elbows in front of the bartender, expiating the boredom he was loudly inflicting with clumsy gropes between pocket and tip jar. Jim and Laura had pretty much worked the room, getting their cheeks pinched ambiguously by Alzheimer's candidates as they flashed the mordant wit she'd passed to them to mollify those peers who retained some clarity.

Father John, the nephew canonized as her favorite by dint of his vocation and distance, drifted by, basking in his Jameson's. "Nice touch, you two. She'd have been proud."

She watched him leave to resume the cheerful falsehoods of ignorant comfort. "I need air. C'mon."

They repaired to the stunted ballroom's balcony. Jim lipped a cigarette and flicked at a balky flint.

"Gimme one."

He withdrew another, lit it, and handed it over.

"When did you start smoking?"

"Tobacco? Never."

Even half-hidden under her lids, her irises were huge. Lesser men had slipped into those pools and drowned desperately, like non-swimmers. Until Jon. In low heels, she was his equal. *Six feet tall; blonde, gorgeous. My little sister, The Man-Eater.* He entertained the phenomenon of magnetism between weak men and strong women again and almost as quickly dismissed it, still unresolved. She caught the quiver at the corner of his mouth opposite the butt.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She exhaled, her blue vapor creating a vortex in his. "Ever think of quitting?"

"Constantly. Should be a no-brainer. The old man croaks from lung cancer—not young, but not old. The grandkids nag her into quitting, so she lives another 20 years, then dies from emphysema. I was the athlete, and the only one who took it up." He reflected, then pointed the tiny ember at her. "See, this is why my therapist's Benz is never more than three years old."

She laughed. Her head cycled up methodically, like an observatory's telescope, measuring the winking constellations. "Did they really love each other?"

Pathos and guilt radiated in him like gin. *Eight years old when Dad died. She missed so much,* he thought. "Oh, yeah."

"How do you know?"

"I'd catch 'em."

"Ick. Do I want to hear this?"

He realized, and waved the specter away. "No, I mean touching and kissing and stuff. It was weird; they tried not to fight in front of us, but the same restriction applied to PDAs. Like there's a rule that

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