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A flicker of complacency showed in Otters tired, battered young face. "No," he said. "I don't think anybody can." If he hadn't been such a rational, stable, no-nonsense person all of his life, Junior might have thought he was losing his mind. "That's just ... an old joke," she heard herself saying, as from a distance. "You didn't really walk between the drops?" To become a physical therapist, Junior had taken more than massage classes, so he knew what hematemeses meant. Hematemesis: vomiting of blood. But first, March 23: the bad date with Frieda Bliss, and what he discovered in his apartment when he came home that night. Startled, Junior sat up straight, clutching the silencer-fitted pistol, but the cruiser didn't abruptly brake and pull to the curb in front of the Mercedes, as he expected. Dr. Zedd's death, just last Thanksgiving, had been a blow to Junior, a loss to the nation, to the entire world. He considered it a tragedy equal to the Kennedy assassination one year previous. Whereas Edom feared the wrath of nature, Jacob knew that the true hand of doom was the hand of humankind. With everyone in the diner now aware of Junior, with every head turned toward him and with every wary eye tracking him, he dropped the bun cap and the mustard dispenser on the floor. Barging through the swinging gate at the end of the lunch counter, he entered the narrow work area behind it. Then he closed his eyes, held the revolver in both hands, and at point-blank range, he shot the dead woman twice. From the devil to the sacred and then beyond, Junior drove north on State Highway 160, which was proudly marked as a scenic route, although in these predawn hours, all lay bleak and black. Following the serpentine course of the Sacramento River, Highway 160 wove past a handful of small, widely separated towns. "This momentous day," Thomas Vanadium said quietly, stiff gazing into the grave, "seems full of terrible endings. But like every day, it's actually full of nothing but beginnings." Too late for interrogation now, with Vanadium bludgeoned into eternal sleep and resting under many fathoms of cold bedding. The cord wasn't long enough to allow Celestina to take the telephone handset with her, so she put it down on the nightstand, beside the lamp. "Well," Kathleen said, "even if the money wasn't so nice, I'd be sorry to see this case end." Turning his attention to Barty, Obadiah broke into a smile, revealing a gold upper tooth. "Something here is sweeter than that lovely pie. What's the child's name?" For more than twenty-three years, he'd given his big toe little consideration, had taken it for granted, had treated it with shameful neglect. Now this lower digit seemed precious, a comparatively small fixture of flesh, but as important to his image of himself as his nose or either of his eyes. Even though the detective was on the wrong track, Junior was beginning to feel aggrieved. As any good citizen, he was willing, even eager to cooperate with responsible policemen who conducted their investigation by the book. This Thomas Vanadium, however, in spite of his monotonous voice and drab appearance, gave off the vibes of a fanatic. If the policeman's gray eyes had earlier been as hard as nailheads, they were now points, and behind them was willpower strong enough to drive spikes through stone. With his ringleted yellow hair, coiled mustache, and haughty right file, this was a jack that looked as if he might be a knave in the worst sense of the word. 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." His homely face was long and narrow, as though pulled into that shape by the weight of his responsibilities. In other circumstances, however, his generous mouth might have shaped an appealing smile; and his green eyes had in them the compassion of someone who himself had known great loss. "Really, Angel," Barty said with genuine concern, "it might be scary. I got another one we could listen to, if you want." From time to time, customers had crossed the cocktail lounge to drop folding money into a fishbowl atop the piano, tips for the musician. A few had requested favorite -tunes. thickened with the odors of antiseptics and blood, until breathing required an effort. "Not really. I love you, Mommy." He yawned and dropped into sleep with a quickness that always amazed her. And then everything changed in one stunning moment. Changed profoundly and forever. Junior was paying his dinner check and calculating the tip when the pianist launched into "Someone to Watch over Me." Although he'd expected it all evening, he twitched when he recognized the tune. After too many years investigating homicides, after too much experience of human evil, perhaps he had grown both misanthropic and paranoid. Otter was silent a while. Then he said in a low voice, "Clay, and gravel, and under that the rock that bears garnets. All under this part of the city is that rock. I don't know the names." or the barber. Never was he afraid to fall asleep, and having fallen asleep, he appeared to have only pleasant dreams. Junior raised his voice even further: "In those old movies, the Little Rascals." "Yes, but it's a Catholic hospital, and they offer this option to all unwed mothers-doesn't matter what their religion." The dining table could accommodate six, and Agnes instructed Maria to set two places on each of the long sides, leaving the ends unused. "It'll be cozier if we all sit across from one another." Second-stage labor was supposed to last about fifty minutes in a woman bearing her first child, as little as twenty if the birth was not the first, but she sensed that Bartholomew was not going to come into the world by the book. The decision had already been made that Grace would move in with Celestina and then following the wedding-with Celestina and Wally. In Spruce Hills, she had dear friends whom she would miss, but there was nothing else in Oregon to draw her back, other than the narrow plot beside Harrison, where she expected eventually to be buried. The parsonage fire had destroyed all her personal effects and every family treasure from Celestina's grade-school spelling-bee medals to the last precious photograph. She wanted only to be close to her one remaining daughter and her granddaughter, to be part of the new life that they would build with Wally Lipscomb. Junior continued east, weaving through the horde, convinced that he could hear the ghost cop's footsteps distinct from the tramping noise made by the legions of the living, penetrating the grumble and the bleat of traffic. Hollow, the dead man's tread echoed not only in Junior's ears but also through his body, in his bones. Junior put the money on the desk. "Then get into the records of Family Services." Unbuttoning her blouse, Celestina said, "Traditionally, puppies don't have a role in weddings." The

forger's crossed eyes glowed with reflected light from the screen. He licked his rubbery lips, and his prominent Adam's apple bobbed: "Like to drain my pipes in that Faye Dunaway, huh?". Struggling to keep a grip on consciousness, Junior told himself to focus on the future, to live in the future, free of the useless past and the difficult present, but he could not get into the future far enough to be in a time when the pain was no longer with him. Now, here, all three on the street and vulnerable at once—the man, Celestina, the bastard boy. 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. "No. It's, stopped. The thing now is to prevent a recurrence of the emesis, which could trigger more bleeding. He's getting antinausea medication and replacement electrolytes intravenously, and we've applied ice bags to his midsection to reduce the chance of further abdominal-muscle spasms and to help control inflammation." From the bathroom, Junior gathered an electric razor and toiletries. He added these to the suitcases. Clutching the blanket, she thought of the funerary lap robes that red the legs of the deceased in their caskets, for she felt sometimes cove half dead. Both feet in this world—yet walking beside Joey on a strange road Beyond. Everyone agreed, and the order was placed when their waiter brought appetizers: crab cakes for Nolly, scampi for Kathleen, and calamari for Tom. The receptionist, Rebecca, had stayed late, just to keep company with Barty in the waiting room. As she settled into a chair beside the boy, he asked her if she knew what gravity was on Mars, and when she confessed ignorance, he said, "Only thirty-seven percent what it is here. You can really jump on Mars." "That would be John George Haigh," Agnes said, checking Barty's diaper before nestling him tenderly in the crook of her arm. draftsman? Having never been nudged in that direction, would Cain have followed a different path that took him far from Celestina and Angel? As if he'd been presented with many previous photos under these circumstances, Jonas Salk accepted the picture. "Your daughter?" 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?" In the time of the kings, mages gathered in the court of Enlad and later in the court of Havnor to counsel the king and take counsel together, using their arts to pursue goals they agreed were good. But in the dark years, wizards sold their skills to the highest bidder, pitting their powers one against the other in duels and combats of sorcery, careless of the evils they did, or worse than careless. Plagues and famines, the failure of springs of water, summers with no rain and years with no summer, the birth of sickly and monstrous young to sheep and cattle, the birth of sickly and monstrous children to the people of the isles—all these things were charged to the practices of wizards and witches, and all too often rightly so. 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. For a spirit, the maniac lawman appeared disturbingly solid. He wore a tweed sports jacket and slacks that, as far as Junior could tell, were the same clothes he'd worn on the night he died. Apparently, even the ghosts of Sklent's atheistic spiritual world were stuck for eternity in the clothes in which they had perished. Saturday morning, Paul made himself useful by assisting Grace with food preparation and by setting out the plates, flatware, and glasses on the dining-room sideboard. "You did just fine, Tom, just fine," Agnes said in a consoling tone that she might have used with a boy whose performance, at a piano recital, had been earnest but undistinguished. "We were all quite impressed." MONEY FOR THE DEAD. The decomposing flesh of a beloved wife and an unborn baby transmuted into a fortune was an achievement that put to shame the alchemists' dreams of turning lead to gold. 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. the stems, thorns sharp against his tongue. And then Agnes. Agnes in the yard, screaming. Naomi's beautiful countenance rose in his mind, and she looked beautiful for a moment, but then he thought he saw a certain slyness in her angelic smile, a disturbing glint of calculation in her once loving eyes. Junior locked the door. He started the engine and drove out of the cemetery faster than was prudent on the winding service road. Quick introductions were made in the process of moving from the porch to the foyer, and Agnes said, "Come on back to the kitchen, I'm baking pies." When he was baking, the world seemed to be a less dangerous place. Sometimes, making a cake, he forgot to be afraid. Otter stated it as an unfortunate fact, not as a moral assertion. Hound looked at him with appreciation. Living with the pirate king, he was sick of boasts and threats, of boasters and threateners. Using this apartment as a base, Nolly and Kathleen had conducted some of the small skirmishes in the first phase of the war, including the ghost serenades. They left the place tidy. Indeed, the only sign that they had ever been here was a packet of dental floss left behind on the sill of a living-room window. "Honey," she said, crouching to peer at him through the vertical slats of the playpen, "what're you doing?" It's been a joy to me to go back to Earthsea and find it still there, entirely familiar, and yet changed and still changing. What I thought was going to happen isn't what's happening, people aren't who-or what-I thought they were, and I lose my way on islands I thought I knew by heart. "Nick," he suggested, as though any reason existed for her to be on a first-name basis with the man who killed her husband. "I wasn't drinking." Cain turned the pistol on Barty, but when Tom charged, Cain swung toward him once more. The round that he fired would have been a crippler, maybe a killer, except that Angel launched herself off the window seat behind Cain and gave him a hard shove, spoiling his aim. The killer stumbled and then shimmered. Pulling herself up in the bed, peering at him suspiciously, she said, "You've gone and memorized old Emily." Because of his blindness and his intellectual gifts, Barty was home schooled; besides, no teacher was a match for his

autodidactic skills, nor could anyone possibly inspire in him a greater thirst for knowledge than the one with which he had been born. Angel went to this same informal classroom, and her sole fellow student was also her teacher. They aced the periodic equivalency tests that the law required. Their constant companionship seemed to be all play, yet was filled with constant learning, too..Even on good days, when he wasn't hassled by the spirits of dead cops and wasn't prepping himself to commit murder, Junior sometimes grew uncomfortable in these bustling crowds. This afternoon, he felt especially claustrophobic as he shouldered through the throng-and admittedly paranoid, too..Thrilled by the music but unable to understand a word of the play, he arranged German lessons with a private tutor.."I sure think so. I think she's everything. I tell her she's the moon and stars. I'm probably spoiling her rotten."..His Country Squire laden with cookies, plum cakes, homemade caramel corn with almonds, and gifts, Edom drove directly home from Obadiah Sepharad's place, which had been their final stop. He roared away as if trying to outrun tornadoes and tidal waves..He had been warned about this accuracy issue by the thumbless young thug who delivered the weapon in a bag of Chinese takeout, in Old St. Mary's Church. Junior tended to believe the warning, because he figured the eight-fingered felon might have been deprived of his thumbs as punishment for having forgotten to relay the same or an equally important message to a customer in the past, thus assuring his current conscientious attention to detail.."Sometimes she wrote little paragraphs to God, very touching and humble notes of gratitude, thanking Him for bringing you into her life."..His breath was warm against her throat: "And I want to go back home to see some faces."..Junior had made a mistake when he smashed the pewter stick into Vanadium's face after the cop was already unconscious. He should have bound the bastard and attempted to revive him for interrogation..Amazed, Agnes gaped at her baby. The throat lump that blocked her speech was part pride, part awe, and part fear, though she didn't at once understand why this wonderful precociousness should frighten her..A s?ance was what it appeared to be at first. Eight people were gathered around the dining-room table, which stood utterly bare. No food, no drinks, no centerpiece. They all exhibited that shiny-faced look of people nervously awaiting the revelations of a spirit medium: part trepidation, part soaring hope..If the directory proved to be of no help, Junior would proceed next to the registry office at the county courthouse, to review the records of births going back to the turn of the century if necessary. Bartholomew, of course, might not have been born in the county, might have moved here as a child or an adult. If he owned property, he'd show up on the register of deeds. Whether a landowner or not, if he did his civic duty every two years, he would appear on the voter rolls..Her case of polio had been so severe that braces and crutches were never an option. Muscle rehabilitation had been ineffective..Vanadium was dead. Pounded with pewter and sunk in a flooded quarry. Gone forever..Junior hadn't noticed when the detective stopped turning the coin across his knuckles..At last he said, "And there he is, hands in front of his face, quarters bouncing off him, these kids and this old lady scrambling around him to snare some change."..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.."So entertaining, I felt I should have paid for those seats. When the third machine starts whizzing coins at him, he bolts like a kid running a graveyard at midnight on a dare." Nolly laughed, remembering..Magusson's idea of a laugh. "And they didn't even bother to post a warning. In fact, that sign was still up, inviting hikers to enjoy the view from the observation deck."..PZ7.L52I5 Tal 2001 [Fic]-dc21 2001016554..One, two, three, four-Edom took away all the remaining pies. He pointed at Barty and then at the empty table..He wasn't entirely sure what all he hoped to find. Perhaps an envelope or a cash box with folding money, which a fleeing murderer would surely pause to take with him. Suspicions might be raised if he left it behind. Perhaps a savings-account passbook.."August, 1931. Along the Huang He River in China. Three million seven hundred thousand people died in a great flood," Edom said..The boy didn't at once answer, and when Agnes looked up from Red Planet, she saw that he was staring oddly at her. He squinted, as if puzzled, and said, "The twisty spots just jumped off the page right up on your face."..Barty, she explained, would be rich in many ways. Financially rich, but also rich in talent, in spirit, intellect. Rich in courage, honor. With a wealth of common sense, good judgment, and luck..He couldn't much longer take advantage of Paul Damascus's hospitality. Since bringing Wally to town, Tom had been staying in Paul's guest bedroom. He knew that he was welcome indefinitely, and the sense of family that he'd found with these people had only grown since January, but he nevertheless felt that he was imposing..Someone she had known. Someone Celestina, too, might know. He lived in or around Spruce Hills, because Phimie had considered him still to be a threat..Already another contraction racked her, so intense that the pain was not limited to her lower back and abdomen, but seared the length of her sphic, like an electric current leaping vertebra to vertebra. Her breath pinched in her chest as though her lungs had collapsed..Piano music drifted into the restaurant from the adjacent bar, so soft and yet sprightly that it made the clink of silverware seem like music, too..On Tuesday, January 2, Junior met with the drug dealer who had introduced him to Google, the document forger, and he arranged to purchase a 9-mm handgun with custom-machined silencer..Jacob had spent most of two days baking Barty's favorite pies, cakes, and cookies, and he'd prepared a meal as well. Maria's girls were at her sister's place this evening, so she stayed for dinner. Edom poured wine for everyone but Barty, root beer for the guest of honor, and while this couldn't be called a celebration, Agnes's spirits were lifted by a sense of normality, of hope, of family.

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