

## **LIFE IS DECISIONS STEPHENS PERSONAL PROVERBS**

To look entirely like her name, she needed only white wings. He would give her wings: a short flight out the window, into the oak. One of the hardest things that she had ever done was to leave him then, alone in his room, with the hateful something still quietly growing in his eye. She wanted to move the armchair close to his bed and watch over him throughout the night. The baby felt too light to be real. She weighed five pounds fourteen ounces, but she seemed lighter than air, as though she might float up and out of her aunt's arms. "Not so bad, two thousand," Tom heard himself say idiotically. "I mean, compared to nearly four million." "I've already told them," Joey said, wheeling away from her and yanking open the door of the foyer closet with such force that she thought he would tear it off its hinges. He pushed back the bedclothes and sat up, leaning against the pillows and headboard. "This is maybe a hard thing for you to do, but it's really important." Vanadium flipped the quarter straight into the air and at once spread his arms, palms turned up to show that his hands were empty. Because, since childhood, Jacob had been drawn to stories and images of doom, to catastrophe on both the personal and the planetary scale—from theater fires to all-out nuclear war—he had a flamboyant imagination second to none and a colorful if peculiar intellectual life. For him, therefore, the most difficult part of learning card manipulation had been coping with the tedium of practice, but for years he had applied himself diligently, motivated by his love and admiration for his sister, Agnes. From a cutlery drawer, Tom withdrew a knife. The largest and sharpest blade in the small collection. Certain the caller was the police operator, Junior screamed as though in agony, wondering if his cries sounded genuine, since he'd had no opportunity to rehearse. Then, in spite of the painkiller, his cries suddenly were genuine. The slamming of Junior's heart sounded as loud to him as mortar rounds. He stepped back and sideways, out of the vending machine's line of fire. Agnes Lampion would enthrall them, for hers was a life of clear significance. That they seemed equally interested in Paul's story, however, surprised him. Perhaps they were merely being kind, and yet with apparent fascination, they drew out of him so many details of his long walks, of the places he had been and the reasons why, of his life with Perri. This momentous day. In every ending, new beginnings. But, thank God, no ending here. This saving spirit retreated, and in his place came a young paramedic in a black-and-yellow rain slicker over hospital whites. "Just want to be sure there's no spinal injury before we move you. Can you squeeze my hands?" He was too sensitive a soul to be able to take either a handsaw or a power saw to a corpse. Bad news. Having been identified by another guest put Junior at risk of later being tied to the killing; having been recognized by a close personal friend of Celestina White's was even worse. It had become imperative now that he know why the pianist had been watching him from across the room with such intensity. Paul set the nightstand down but waited, ready to shove the furniture into the stairwell if the swaddled gunman dared return. Neighbors might not be home. And by the time he knocked, asked to use the phone, dialed ... Too great a waste of time. "She reads too much hard-boiled detective fiction," Nolly said. "And lately, she's talking about writing it." Tom Vanadium rose to his feet and, with one hand on Barty's shoulder, he surveyed the faces of those gathered on the porch. Most of these people were such new acquaintances that they were all but strangers to him. Nevertheless, for the first time since his early days in St. Anselmo's Orphanage, he'd found a place where he belonged. This felt like home. The port-wine birthmark appeared to be darker than before and differently mottled than he remembered it. FOR JUNIOR CAIN, the Year of the Horse (1966) and the Year of the Sheep (1967) offered many opportunities for personal growth and self-improvement. Even if by Christmas Eve, '67, Junior would not be able to take a dry walk in the rain, this nevertheless was a period of great achievement and much pleasure for him. 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 kitchen again, Junior spread the blanket on the floor, to one side of the blood. He rolled Vanadium onto the blanket, and drew the ends of it together, fashioning a sled with which to drag the detective out of the house. Edom observed, amazed, as Agnes chatted up their host, going from Mr. Sepharad to Obadiah, from the doorstep to the living room, the pie delivered and accepted, coffee offered and served, the two of them pleased and easy with each other, all in the time that it would have taken Edom himself to get up the nerve to cross the threshold and to think of something interesting to say about the Galveston hurricane of 1900, in which six thousand had died. Celestina threw down the weapon even before she turned, and as two cops entered the room, she cried, "He's getting away!" The sleeves of the pajama top were pushed up, revealing more of the disease's vicious work. The muscles of her useless left arm had atrophied; the once graceful hand curled in upon itself, as though holding an invisible object, perhaps the hope she never abandoned. "My God," Junior said, pretending that his befuddlement had faded and that his mind had just now clarified, "you think Naomi was murdered, don't you?" So Barty and Tom just happened to be chatting about a quantum physicist they had seen on a television program, a documentary about the uncanny resonance between the belief in a created universe and some recent discoveries in quantum mechanics and molecular biology. The physicist claimed that a handful of his colleagues, though by no means the majority, believed that with a deepening understanding of the quantum level of reality, there would in time be a surprising rapprochement between science and faith. In the Suburban with Wally and Grace, as they waited to hit the trail, Celestina said, "He took her to a movie again, Tuesday night." Outside, he realized he hadn't paid for his juice and waffles. When he turned back to the coffee shop, he saw, through one of the windows, an associate of Salk's picking up the check from his table. "Maria is coming by with Francesca and Bonita," Agnes said. "We might as well put all the extensions in the table. Barty, call Uncle Jacob and Uncle Edom and invite them for dinner." He got in the Suburban, pulled the door shut, but didn't at once start the engine. He shook his head. "I think he's evil, not crazy. And stupid in the way that evil often is. Too arrogant and too vain to be aware of his stupidity—and therefore

always tangled up in traps of his own making. But nonetheless dangerous for being stupid. In fact, far more dangerous than a wiser man with a sense of consequences." In the face of his kindness, however, she couldn't refuse his request. She nodded. Tom caused less of a stir in the restaurant than Kathleen had expected. Other diners noticed him, of course, but after one or two looks of shock or pity, they appeared indifferent, though this was undoubtedly the thinnest pretense of indifference. The same quality in him that elicited deferential regard from the waiter apparently ensured that others would be courteous enough to respect his privacy. The cop weighed too much to be carried any distance, the blanket proved effective, the decision to drag him was wise, and the whole process was value neutral. 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." Barty grinned mischievously. "One of the places we visited today. Some big kids. They saw this scary movie, said they had to wash their shorts after." "Agnes," said the magician, "you better start meeting with that librarian now to record your own life. If you don't get started for another forty years, by then you'll need a whole decade of talking to get it all down." At the conclusion of the ceremony, he relinquished his secondhand sight. He would live in darkness until Easter of 1986, though every minute of the day was brightened by his wife. Nolly's gums were in great shape, too: firm, pink, no sign of recession, snug to the neck of each tooth. "Not so unbelievable," said Jacob. "Forty-five thousand people every year die in automobiles. Cars aren't transportation. They're death machines. Tens of thousands are disfigured, maimed for life." "Many claimed Maharion's throne, but none could keep it, and the quarrels of the claimants divided all loyalties. No commonwealth was left and no justice, only the will of the wealthy. Men of noble houses, merchants, and pirates, any who could hire soldiers and wizards called himself a lord, claiming lands and cities as his property. The warlords made those they conquered slaves, and those they hired were in truth slaves, having only their masters to safeguard them from rival warlords seizing the lands, and sea-pirates raiding the ports, and bands and hordes of lawless, miserable men dispossessed of their living, driven by hunger to raid and rob." Only madmen were capable of such butchery. Hopeless lunatics like Ed Gein, out there in Wisconsin, arrested just seven years ago, when Junior had been sixteen. Ed, the inspiration for Psycho, had constructed mobiles out of human noses and lips. He used human skin to make lampshades and to upholster furniture. His soup bowls had once been human skulls. He ate the hearts and selected other organs of his victims, wore a belt fashioned from nipples, and occasionally danced under the moon while masked by the scalp and face of a woman he had murdered. Jacob intended to carry the luggage, and Edom announced that he would carry Barty. The boy, however, insisted on making his own way to the house. He didn't wonder about his sanity, either, as a less self-improved man might have done. No madman strives to enhance his vocabulary or to deepen his appreciation for culture. By now, all here assembled knew Celestina well enough that Tom's final example raised an affectionate laugh from the group. At the elevators, the orderly suggested that Edom and Jacob take a second cab and meet them on the surgical floor. The investigator's suite—a minuscule waiting room and a small office—lacked a secretary but surely harbored all manner of vermin. As Nolly hung his raincoat and his porkpie hat on a rack by the hall door, Kathleen Klerkle appeared in the entrance to the nearest of the two treatment rooms. "Are you ready to suffer?" In the instant that Junior had shoved Naomi into the rotted railing, he had foreseen this visit from Rudy, Sheena, and Kaitlin. He'd known he could pretend to be offended at the state's offer to put a price on his loss, could feign revulsion, could resist convincingly—until gradually, after grueling days or weeks, he reluctantly allowed the indefatigable. A mere silhouette against the fluorescent glare, Vanadium stepped it the hall. The bright light seemed to enfold him. The detective shimmered and vanished the way that a mirage of a man, on a fiercely hot desert highway, will appear to walk out of this dimension into another, slipping between the tremulous curtains of heat as though they hang between realities. Celestina checked her wristwatch and saw that she was running late. With Angel's short legs and layers of red, there was no point in trying to hurry. On New Year's Day, the town learned that it had lost its first son in Vietnam. Agnes had known the parents all her life, and she despaired that even with her willingness to help, with all her good intentions, there was nothing she could do to ease their pain. She recalled her anguish as she'd waited to learn if Barty's eye tumors had spread along the optic nerve to his brain. The thought of her neighbors losing a child to war made her turn to Paul in the night. "Just hold me," she murmured. Since the cops believed that Junior accidentally shot himself while searching for a nonexistent burglar, he was already in their book as an idiot. If he tried to explain how Vanadium had tormented him with the quarter, and how a quarter turned up, of all places, in his cheeseburger, they would figure him for a hopeless hysteric. Instinct, even reason, told him that some connection existed between this person, this Bartholomew, and Celestina. The name had terrified Cain in a bad dream, the very night of the day that he'd killed Naomi, and Vanadium therefore had incorporated it into his psychological-warfare strategy without knowing its significance to his suspect. As strongly as he sensed the connection, he couldn't find the link. He lacked some crucial bit of information. "You remember things?" the girl asked, her fingertips still pressed lightly to his cheek. Her hands were locked together in her lap, gripped so tightly for so long that the muscles in her forearms ached. "What's wrong?" Maria's mother, visiting from Mexico, was babysitting, so Maria came without her children, as a guest, joining Agnes and the laugh-a-minute Isaacson twins, chroniclers of destruction. They ate in the dining room, rather than at the kitchen dinette, with a lace-trimmed tablecloth, the good china, crystal wineglasses, and fresh flowers. With his startling combination of a Mediterranean complexion and rust-red hair, his good looks, and his fit physique, Paul had the exotic appearance of a pulp-fiction hero. In particular, he liked to imagine that he might pass for Doc Savage's brother. He was, admittedly, surprised that Nurse Bressler was strongly compelled to come on to him even though she had read his patient file and knew that he'd recently been a veritable geyser of noxious spew, that during the violent seizure in the ambulance, he had also lost control of bladder and

bowels, and that he might at any moment suffer an explosive relapse. This was a remarkable testament to the animal lust he inspired even without trying, to the powerful male magnetism that was as much a part of him as his thick blond hair..The deejay announced song number four for the week: the Beatles' "She's a Woman." The Fab Four filled the Studebaker with music..He didn't pause to lock the house behind them. Bright Beach, in 1965, was as free of criminals as it was untroubled by lumbering brontosaurus.. "Well, maybe you're right," Bellini said somewhat acerbically, before departing, "but then you've had the advantage of an illegal search, while I'm hampered by such niceties as warrants."..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..The doors slid open, and they rolled Barty corridor to corridor, past the scrub sinks, to a waiting surgical nurse in green cap, mask, and gown. She alone effected his transfer into the positive pressure of the surgery..From Joey's closet, she extracted an old blue blazer that he seldom wore anymore. The lining was sagging, worn..He let go of the girl's chin, and at once she scrunched into the corner of the window seat, as far away from him as she could get. The knowing look in her eye wasn't that of an ordinary child, not that of a child at all. Not his imagination, either. Terror, yes, but also defiance, and this knowing expression, as though she could see right through him, knew things about him that she had no way of knowing..When she went upstairs at 2:10 in the morning, she found the boy fast asleep in the soft lamplight, Tunnel in the Sky at his side..Then he looked up at the massive limbs overhead, and the mood changed: A sense of impending insight at once gave way to the fear that an unsuspected fissure in a huge limb might crack through at this precise moment, crushing him under a ton of wood, or that the Big One, striking now, would topple the entire oak..Maybe he would get lucky, and an airliner would fall out of the sky right now, right here, obliterating him in an instant..When Nolly sighed and frowned, his lumpish face seemed in danger of sliding off his skull, like oatmeal oozing off a spoon. "Mr. Cain, much as I regret it, I'm afraid I'm going to have to return half of the retainer you gave me."..According to the cards, Barty would be rich financially, but also in talent, spirit, intellect. Rich in courage and honor, Maria promised. With a wealth of common sense, good judgment, and luck..He ran gasping, praying, feet slapping the concrete sidewalk, frightening birds out of the purple brightness of blossom-laden jacarandas and out of Indian laurels, terrorizing a tree rat into a lightning sprint up the bole of a phoenix palm. The few people he encountered reeled out of his way. Brakes shrieked as he crossed intersections without looking both ways, risking cars and trucks and rhinoceroses..Kathleen savored her martini. "Mmmm ... as cold as a hit man's heart and as crisp as a hundred-dollar bill from the devil's wallet."..He was a patriotic guy, and he preferred American rock to the British brand. He had nothing against the English, no prejudices against people of any nationality. Nevertheless, he believed that the American Top 40 ought to feature American music exclusively..Angel didn't want to go, maybe because the boogeyman schemed beneath the bed in some of her nightmares... So he calls it the King. If you find him his King, he'll treat you well. He's often here. Come on, I'll show you. Dog can't track till he's had the scent."..Paul recalled the letter he had written to Reverend Harrison White a couple weeks after the death of Joey Lampion. He'd carried it home from the pharmacy on the day that Perri died, to ask for her opinion of it. The letter had never been mailed..In his mind's eye, Junior saw the coin in transit of the blunt fingers, moving more swiftly than previously because its passage was lubricated by blood.."You're better at concentrative meditation without seed than anyone I've ever known, better than me. That's why you, especially, should never undertake a long session unsupervised," Chicane scolded. "At the very least, the very least, you should use your electronic meditation timer. I don't see it here, do I?"..He was as solid as any boy. He was in the day but not in the rain. He was moving toward the back of the car..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?"..Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, and charged with anxiety; but under other circumstances, it would have been sexy.."No, the more I think about it, the more it feels like this is just kids. Some kids goofing around, that's all. I- guess Vanadium got deeper under my skin than I realized, so when this came up, I couldn't think straight about it."..She didn't have experience with guns, but having seen him trying to press cartridges into the magazine, she knew how to load. She inserted one round. Then a second. Enough..To his room then, where they sat side by side in bed, a plate of chocolate-chip cookies between them. Through the evening, they stepped off this earth and out of all its troubles, into a world of adventure, where friendship and loyalty and courage and honor could deal with any malignancy.."Maybe he could if he was able to lift it, but I couldn't throw a pig or an Oreo or anything else into any other place. It's just not something I know how to do."..Nevertheless, Junior was thrilled to hear the name Bartholomew, and to know that the boy of whom Celestina spoke was the Bartholomew of Bartholomews, the menacing presence in his unremembered dream, the threat to his fortune and future that must be eliminated..Down the stairs, through the ground floor, quickly, soundlessly, breath held at times, listening for the other's breathing, listening for the softest squeak of rubber-soled shoes, although the hard clack of cloven hoofs and a whiff of sulfur would not have been surprising. At last he went to the kitchen, full circle from the shiny quarter on the breakfast table to the quarter again. No Cain..Barefoot, in midnight-blue silk pajamas, he walked through his rooms turning on lights in a considered pattern, which he had settled upon after much thought and planning..Celestina was maneuvered aside as the surgical team began resuscitation procedures. Stunned, she backed away from the table until she encountered a wall. In southern California, as dawn of this new momentous day looms..The previous April, the lads from Liverpool had claimed all five of the top five. Real Americans, like the Beach Boys and the Four Seasons, were forced to settle for lower numbers. It made you wonder who had really won the Revolutionary War..Had he ever thought he could get away with this? He must have been delusional, temporarily mad.."August, 1931. Along the Huang He River in China. Three million seven hundred thousand people died in a great flood," Edom said..Leavening his tortured voice as best he could with shock and hurt, as though

deeply wounded by the need to speak these words, Junior Cain said, "You ... you think I killed her, don't you? That's crazy.".She searched the child's unfocused eyes for some sign of the hateful father's wickedness..Rudy Hackachak--Big Rude to his friends--was six feet four, as rough-hewn as a log sculpture carved with a woodsman's ax. In a green polyester suit with sleeves an inch too short, an unfortunate urine yellow shirt, and a tie that might have been the national flag of a third world country famous for nothing but a lack of design sense, he looked like Dr. Frankenstein's beast gussied up for an evening of barhopping in Transylvania..The busboy swept the empty appetizer plates away as the waiter arrived simultaneously with small salads. Fresh martinis followed..Fully clothed, she lay atop the bedspread. She intended to listen to a little classical music before brushing her teeth...He did wonder why he had chosen this night of all nights to become even a more fearless adventurer, rather than a month ago or a month hence. Instinct told him that he'd felt the need to test himself, that a crisis was fast approaching, and that to be ready for it, he must be confident that he could do what had to be done when the crunch came. Slipping into sleep, Junior suspected that Prosser might have been less lark than preparation.

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