

## A ROAD CONNECTS PLACES

Reluctantly, Jacob finally returned the cards to the packs and admitted to himself that superstition had seized him and would not let go. Somewhere in the world was a knave, a human monster-even worse, according to Maria, a man as fearsome as the devil himself-and for reasons unknown, this beast wanted to harm little Barty, an innocent baby. By some grace that Jacob could not understand, they had been warned, through the cards, that the knave was coming. They had been warned.."In addition," Daines said, "her pelvis is small, which would present problems of delivery even in an ordinary pregnancy. And the muscle fibers in the central canal of her cervix, which ought to be softening in anticipation of labor, are still tough. I don't believe the cervix will dilate well enough to facilitate birth." Yet that evening, when she'd accepted his proposal and asked if he wasn't frightened, he said, "Not anymore." 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..He produced her coat as if by legerdemain. Magically, she found her arms in the sleeves and the collar around her neck, though given her size lately, putting on anything other than a hat usually required strategy and persistence..No one seemed to realize that predicting the future might not be a suitable entertainment in this house, at this time, considering that Agnes had so recently and horribly been blindsided by fate..From San Francisco south to Orange County Airport on a crowded commuter flight, then farther south along the coast by rental car, Paul Damascus brought Grace, Celestina, and Angel to the Lampion house. "Before we go to my place, there's someone I very much want you to meet. She's not expecting us, but I'm sure it'll be okay." "You can't take much of anything by mouth for a few hours yet," said the nurse. "Nausea is too great a risk. Retching might start you hemorrhaging again." That would not be a productive use of his time. Satisfying, but not prudent. Zedd tells us that time is the most precious thing we have, because we're born with so little of it..As hard of head as she was hard of heart, Victoria had not sustained serious brain damage, only a concussion..With remarkably little splash, the sedan eased into the water. Briefly it floated, bobbling near shore, tipped forward by the weight of the engine. As the lake flooded in through the floor vents, the vehicle settled steadily-then sank rapidly when water reached the two partially open windows..For a driver who had just engaged in a demolition derby with a house, the mummified man was steady on his feet and unhesitant in his actions. He turned to Harrison White and shot him twice in the chest..Nolly, Kathleen, and Sparky had prepared him for Industrial Woman, but when the flashlight beam flared off her fork-and-fan-blade face, Vanadium twitched in fright. Without fully realizing what he was doing, he crossed himself..Having risen higher in the sky during the past couple hours, the gold-coin moon reminted itself as silver, and in the black lake, its reflection rolled across the knuckles of the quiet wavelets.."Shape-taking?" "Go home. Sleep," he said. "You'll be no help to your sister if you wind up a patient here yourself." The first was an ace of hearts. This, Maria said, was a very good card, indeed. It meant that Barty would be lucky in love..Junior had thought the news was the lab report, which had found no ipecac in his spew. All that had been distraction..As Tom reached Celestina, she said, "Shots." She said, "Gunshots." She held the receiver in one hand and pulled at her hair with the other, as if with the administration of a little pain, she might wake up from this nightmare. She said, "He's in Oregon." Her eyes, lustrous pools, brimmed with the need to know, but she respected the deal. "I only half understood all that, and I don't even know which half, but in some strange way, it feels true. Thank you. I will think about it tonight, when I can't sleep." She stepped close and kissed him on the cheek. "Who are you, Tom Vanadium?" So runs the water away, away..Gorging on fudge cake and coffee to guard against a spontaneous lapse into meditative catatonia, Junior manfully admitted that he had been weak, that he had reacted to the unknown with fear and retreat instead of with bold confrontation. Because each of us can trust no one in this world but himself, self-deceit is dangerous. He liked himself better for this frank admission of weakness..Barty stood in the rain, surrounded by the rain, pummeled by the rain, with the rain. Saturated grass squished under his sneakers. The droplets, in their millions, didn't bend-slip-twist magically around his form, didn't hiss into steam a millimeter from his skin. Yet he remained as dry as baby Moses floating on the river in a mother-made ark of bulrushes..With a sigh, Obadiah differed: "Not clever. Crude. Before my hands became these great-knuckled lumps, I could have dazzled you." AS THE WULFSTAN PARTY was being seated at a window table, slowly tumbling masses of cottony fog rolled across the black water, as if the bay had awakened and, rising from its bed, had tossed off great mounds of sheets and blankets..Needlepoint, meditation, and even sex had not recently provided him with significant relief of tension. The paintings of Sklent and the works of Zedd were packed in the van, where he couldn't at the moment take solace from them..He had noted all seven names on the bassinets, but he read them again. He sensed in their names-or in one of their names-the explanation for his seemingly mad perception of a looming threat..Two high-quality deadbolt locks. Sufficient protection against the average intruder, but inadequate to keep out a self-improved man with channeled anger..Gazing into the mirror, which ought to have been clouded with self-pity as though with steam, Junior Cain searched for his anger and found it. This was a black and bitter anger, as poisonous as rattlesnake venom; with little difficulty, his heart was distilling it into purest rage..Copyright (c) 1999 by Ursula K. Le Guin. "Dragonfly" first appeared in Legends..He rode up to the third of five floors in the service elevator, which other tenants were permitted to use only when moving in or moving out, or when taking delivery of large items of furniture. Another elevator, at the front of the building, was too public to suit his purposes..The short walk across the room, to the hero's table, looked more daunting to Paul than the trek he'd just completed. He was nobody, a small-town pharmacist who missed more work each month, who relied increasingly on his worried employees to cover for him, and who would lose his business if he didn't get a grip on himself. He had never done a great deed, never saved a life. He had no right to impose upon this

man, and now he knew he hadn't the nerve to do so, either.. "Oh, dear God," she whispered, and although she had always been a strong woman who stood on a rock of faith, who drew hope as well as air with every breath, she was as weak now as the unborn child in her womb, sick with fear.. He smiled and shrugged. "I used to be a fisher of men. Now I hunt them. One in particular." In his mind, he carried a blueprint of the house more precisely drawn than anything that might have been prepared by an architect. He knew the place to the inch, and he adjusted his pace and all his mental calculations every month to compensate for his steady growth. So many paces from here to there. Every turn and every peculiarity of the floor plan committed indelibly to memory. A journey like this was a complicated mathematical problem, but being a math prodigy, he moved through his home almost as easily as when he had enjoyed sight.. Had Kathleen Klerkle been a man, she would have enjoyed larger quarters in a newer building in a better part of town. She was more gentle and respectful of the patient's comfort than any male dentist Nolly had ever known, but prejudice hampered women in her profession.. "Maybe because we didn't want to be called witches," said Obadiah with a smile, "and give folks one more reason to hang us." With the successful consumption of the burger and with the addition of the third Sklent to his collection, Junior felt more upbeat than he'd been in quite a while. Contributing to his better mood was the fact that he hadn't heard the phantom singer in longer than three months, since the library in July.. He hadn't paid close attention to those patrons seated at the bar behind him. Now, he turned in his chair to study them.. Now, if Victoria reported to Vanadium that Junior had shown up at her door with a red rose and a bottle of Merlot and with romance on his mind, the demented detective would be on his ass again for sure. Vanadium might think that the nurse had misinterpreted the business with the ice spoon, but the intent in this instance would be unmistakable, and the crusading cop-the holy fool-would never give up.. Hope, on many wings, hovered all around the physician, but he was afraid to let it roost.. As luck would have it," the nun said, "Dr. Lipscomb was in the when it happened. He'd just delivered another baby under.. Fortunately, he'd kept neither cash nor his checkbook in the suitcase. With Zedd intact, his losses were tolerable.. Although, by unspoken agreement, they avoided any talk of loss and death, the mood remained grim. Angel sat in thoughtful silence, pushing her food around her plate rather than eating it. Her demeanor intrigued Tom, and he noticed that it worried her mother, who put a different interpretation on it than he did.. To the alleyway again. Not through the clodhopper-cluttered gallery this time. Around the block at a brisk walk.. For more than two weeks, Agnes's heart had been a clangorous place, filled with the rattle and bang of hard emotions, but now a sort of quiet had come upon it, a peace that, if it held, might one day allow joy again.. "He knew how you felt about having too much life insurance. So he didn't disclose it to you." As Junior blew his nose and blotted his eyes, Vanadium said, "I believe YOU actually loved her in some strange way." Junior stood at the window for a long time, not because he was pretending to rest, and not because any of the attending nurses was a looker. He was transfixed, and for awhile he didn't know why.. So the practice of their lore and the teaching of it had become perilous. Those who undertook it were often those already outcast, crippled, deranged, without family, old-women and men who had little to lose. The wise man and wise woman, trusted and held in reverence, gave way to the stock figures of the shuffling, impotent village sorcerer with his trickeries, the hag-witch with her potions used in aid of lust, jealousy, and malice. And a child's gift for magic became a thing to dread and hide.. "You should be with your children," Agnes worried. Maria looked up. "My babies are sitted with my sister." This seemed to be a statement of great mystery and beauty, and Agnes was still contemplating it when the last of the ice melted on her tongue. Instead of more ice, sleep was spooned into her, as dark and rich as baker's chocolate.. Hope was the handmaid to Agnes's faith. She always held fast to the belief that the future would be bright, but right now she was hesitant to test that optimism even with a harmless card reading. Yet, as with the fifth place setting, she was reluctant to object.. In her arms, little Barty burbled contentedly, unaware that his destiny supposedly included epic love, fabulous riches, and violence.. Eventually he put the quarter on the nightstand, switched off the lamp, and slipped into bed.. The guy was carrying a purse, whatever that meant, and when he walked through the door, he had a goofy look on his face, but his expression changed when he saw Junior.. An outrageously sexy redhead hit on him as he selected from an array of bomb-shaped canapes on a tray held by a waiter dressed as a ragged and soot-smearred blast survivor. Myrtle, the redhead, preferred to be called Scamp, which Junior entirely understood. She wore a DayGlo green miniskirt, a spray-on white sweater, and a green beret.. Draped across his midsection, the terrible cold weight had chilled his flesh; but now his bone marrow prickled with ice at the thought of the birthmarked detective sitting silently in the dark, watching. Junior would have preferred dealing with Naomi, dead and risen and seriously pissed, rather than with this dangerously patient man.. Celestina extended her left hand, which shook so badly that she nearly knocked over both their wineglasses. "I will." He could recall clearly when he had known that he would marry her: during his first year of college, when he'd returned home for the Christmas break. Away at school, he had missed her every day, and the moment that he saw her again, an abiding tension left him, and he felt at peace for the first time in months.. Dr. Leland Daines, Celestina's internist, arrived directly from dinner at the Ritz-Carlton. Although Dairies had receding white hair and a seamed face, time had been kind enough to make him look not so much old as dignified. Long in practice, he was nevertheless free of arrogance, soft-spoken and with a bottomless supply of patience.. "One of the things I was searching for in your house was a life insurance policy on your wife. I didn't find one. Didn't find any canceled checks for the premium, either." Although their apartments were above the garage, back to back, each was served by a separate exterior staircase. As often as either man entered the other's domain, they might as well have lived hundreds of miles apart.. 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.. 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..One worrisome problem: Neddy might be found in the container before it had been hauled away, instead of at the landfill that preferably would serve as his next-to-last resting place. If his body was discovered here, it must be at a distance from any trash bin used by the gallery. The less likely the cops were to connect Neddy to Greenbaum's art-sausage factory, the less likely they also were to connect the murder to Junior..Celestina circled him, half carrying but also half dragging the chair, either because her nerves were still ringing and her arms were weak--or because she was faking weakness in the hope of luring him to a reckless response. Junior circled her while she rounded oil him frantically trying to deal with the pistol without taking his eyes off his adversary..Now that Tom knew what to look for, the gloom couldn't conceal the incredible truth..Not many men wore hats these days. Since his teenage years, Nolly had favored a porkpie model. San Francisco was often chilly, and he began losing his hair when still young..Throughout lunch and, indeed, during his hours as an outpatient at the hospital, Barty gave no indication that he understood the gravity of his situation. He remained cheerful, charming the doctors and technicians with his sweet personality and precocious chatter..Chase after her on foot. Shoot her in the car. Maybe. He'd have five rounds left if he used one on the man, four on Bartholomew..If the angular mass was Neddy, the vaguely warm, damp something must be the strangled man's protruding tongue.."A wonderful wedding," Celestina promised her, taking a pair of pajamas from a dresser drawer..Through miles of worry, natural beauty, imagined omens, and the iron-red sands of Mars, they drove at last to Franklin Chan's offices in Newport Beach..She started toward the door, stopped, and turned to him in the dark. "Kid of mine?".Without commenting, Tom continued: "And worlds just like ours--except that my parents never met, and I was never born. Worlds in which Wally was never shot because he was too unsure of himself or just too stupid to take Celestina to dinner that night or to ask her to marry him."..He had never expressed opposition to starting a family. She'd had no reason to fear telling him that she was carrying their child..Instead of immediately killing anyone, Junior returned to his apartment on the afternoon of December 29, and went to bed, fully clothed. To calm down. To think about focus..In the noble ruin of his face, Thomas Vanadium's smoke-gray eyes were striking, filled with a beautiful ... sorrow. Not self-pity. He clearly didn't regard himself as a victim. This, Kathleen felt, was the sorrow of a man who had seen too much of the suffering of others, who knew the evil ways of the world. These were eyes that read you at a glance, that shone with compassion if you deserved it, and that glared with a terrifying judgment if compassion wasn't warranted..Behind the dog, Mary walked out of nowhere, ball in hand, and Koko whirled in surprise, and the chase was on again..Convinced he was alone and unobserved, Junior leaned into the car and shifted it out of park. He released the hand brake..Mrs. Cain's little boy felt small, weak, sorry for himself, and terribly alone. The detective was still here, but his presence only aggravated Junior's sense of isolation..Though she was only a week past her third birthday, Angel always selected her own clothes and carefully dressed herself. Usually she preferred monochromatic outfits, sometimes with a single accent color expressed only in a belt or a hat, or a scarf. When she mixed several colors, the initial impression that she gave was of chromatic chaos--but on second look, you began to see that these unlikely combinations were more harmonious than they had first seemed..Having used his body as a clapper in the bell of the Dumpster, Junior had struck a loud reverberant note that tolled like a poorly cast cathedral bell, echoing solemnly off the walls of the flanking buildings, back and forth through the fogbound night.."Oh, Wally, I am worried. I'm deeply worried. My mama is going to buy herself a first-class ticket to the fiery pit if she doesn't stop this prevaricatin'!".Sometimes Celestina marveled at how intimately and inextricably the tendrils of tragedy and joy were intertwined in the vine of life. Sorrow was often the root of future joy, and joy could be the seed of sorrow yet to come. The layered patterns in the vine were so complex, so enrapturing in their lush detail and so fearsome in their wild inevitability, that she could fill uncountable canvases, through many lifetimes as an artist, striving to capture the enigmatic nature of existence, in all its beauty dark and bright, and in the end merely suggest the palest shadow of its mystery..The detective gazed at the cash as longingly as a glutton might stare at a custard pie, as intensely as a satyr might ogle a naked blonde. "Impossible. Too damn much integrity in their system. You might as well ask me to go to Buckingham Palace and fetch you a pair of the queen's undies."..Phimie said the creep thought it was funny, but using Daddy's voice as background music also ... well, aroused him, maybe because it further humiliated her and because he knew it would humiliate our father. But we never told Daddy that part of it. Neither of us saw any useful reason for telling him."..Because Cain had called him to get a recommendation of a P. I. here in San Francisco," said Kathleen. "To find out what happened to Seraphim White's baby."..As always in uncertainty, she asked herself what her mother would do in this situation. Grace, of infinite grace, unfailingly did precisely the needed thing, knew exactly the right words to console, to enlighten, to charm a smile out of even the miserable. Often, however, the needed thing involved no words, because in our journey we so often feel abandoned, and we need only to be reassured that we are not alone..He had never associated Enoch Cain's dreaded Bartholomew with the disciple Bartholomew in Harrison White's sermon, which had been broadcast once in December '64, the month prior to Naomi's murder and again in January '65. Even now, with blood-scrawled-and-stabbed Bartholomew on the wall and with This Momentous Day before him in the brochure, Tom Vanadium couldn't quite make the connection. He strove to pull together the broken lengths in this chain of evidence, but they remained separated by one missing link..When he held fast to his sanity, common sense eventually told him that the coin must have been left much earlier in the night, soon after he had set out for Victoria's house. In fact, in spite of the new locks, Vanadium must have stopped here on his way to see Victoria, unaware that he would meet his death in her kitchen--and at the hands of the very man he was tormenting..In this brighter light, he further examined the gallery brochure and discovered Celestina's photograph. She and her sister were not as alike as twins, but the resemblance was striking..Had he ever thought he could get away with this? He must have been delusional, temporarily mad..calm. He tried to imagine what Victoria's breasts would look

like, freed from all restraint..Agnes wanted to tell them that all their efforts would be to no avail, that they should cease and desist, be kind and let her go. She had no reason to stay here anymore. She was moving on to be with her dead husband and her dead baby, moving on to a place where there was no pain, where no one was as poor as she herself had been too nervous to eat anything. She'd held the same glass of untasted champagne throughout the evening, clutching it as though it were a mooring buoy that would prevent her from being swept away in a storm..Behind her, he said, "And is that my gray cardigan? What did you do to my cardigan?".Round of face and round of body, Vinnie didn't walk like other men; he seemed to bounce lightly along, as if inflated with a mixture of gases that included enough helium to make him buoyant, though not so much that he was in danger of sailing up and away like a birthday balloon. His smooth cheeks and merry eyes left a boyish impression, but he was a good attorney, and shrewd..When the highway passed through a sunless ravine, he had broken into a sour sweat at the sight of the bloody pulsing reflections of the revolving rooftop beacons on the bracketing cut-shale walls. Now and then, the siren shrieked to clear traffic ahead, and he felt the urge to scream with it, to let loose a wail of terror and anguish and confusion and loss..A calico cat appeared at Tom's side, running, pacing him. Cats were witches' familiars. Good luck or bad, this cat?.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..By the time Junior passed the three offices and found the men's room, Neddy had occupied it. The door was locked, which must mean this was a single-occupant john..When Agnes woke at 1:50 A.M., she was in the grip of a vague apprehension for which she couldn't identify a source..Agnes meant to stop Maria from turning the eleventh card, but her curiosity was equal to her apprehension..In the crisis, the rack holding her oxygen bottle had been rolled to the bed. The breathing mask lay on the pillow beside her..With a paper towel, Junior wiped the revolver. He dropped it on the floor beside the riddled nurse..Junior knew that he must remain vigilant. Vigilant and focused until January 12 had come and gone. Eight days to go..The time had come for him to think more seriously about his situation and his future. Self-improvement remained a laudable goal, but his efforts needed to be more focused.."You look as if you've seen a ghost," said Vinnie, and Agnes wished the threat were as simple as a restless spirit, groaning and rattling its chains, like Dickens's Marley come to Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve..As if he'd been presented with many previous photos under these circumstances, Jonas Salk accepted the picture. "Your daughter?". "Sure. Or why don't I pull a Rumpelstiltskin and demand one of her children for payment' ".WEDNESDAY, fully two days after delivering honey-raisin pear pies with Agnes, Edom worked up the nerve to visit Jacob..He pressed his right ear to the door, held his breath, heard nothing, and addressed the top lock first. Quietly, he slid the thin pick of the lock-release gun into the key channel, under the pin tumblers..He didn't even dare to pretend to wake up now, with a mutter and a yawn because the detective would know that he was faking, that he had been awake all along. And if he'd been feigning unconsciousness, eaves. The moonlight had faded and the gentle waves had ebbed out of his mind's eye. He concentrated, trying to force the phantom sea to flow back into view, but this was one of those rare occasions when a Zedd technique failed him".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..Startled, the pianist turned to face him-and backed off a step, as though his personal space had been too deeply invaded. "Oh, well, thank you, that's kind. I love my work, you know, it's so much fun it hardly qualifies as work at all. I've been playing the piano since I was six, and I was never one of those children who whined about having to take lessons. I simply couldn't get enough.".He shouldered past two counter waitresses, past the short-order cook who was working eggs and burgers and bacon on the open griddle and grill. Whatever expression wrenched Junior's face, it must have been intimidating, for without protest but with walled alarm, the employees squeezed aside to let him pass..To her mother, Celestina said, "What did you mean when you said you'd heard all about Barty here?".Still cautious, Junior approached the back door, the window. Vanadium's body lay on the car floor, wrapped in the tumbled blanket..He had been stowed in a storeroom of one of the old palaces that Losen had appropriated. It had no window, its door was cross-grained oak barred with iron, and spells had been laid on that door that would have kept a far more experienced wizard captive. There were men of great skill and power in Losen's pay. Hound did not consider himself to be one of them. "All I have is a nose," he said. He came daily to see that Otter was recovering from his concussion and dislocated shoulder, and to talk with him. He was, as far as Otter could see, well-meaning and honest. "If you won't work for us they'll kill you," he said. "Losen can't have fellows like you on the loose. You'd better hire on while he'll take you.".Junior could only imagine how flattered Victoria would be to receive the attentions of a twenty-three-year-old stud, flattered and grateful. When he contemplated all the ways she could express that gratitude, there was barely enough room behind the wheel of the Suburban for him and his manhood..In his voice, he heard a tremor that had nothing to do with the hideous deaths in Effingham more than sixteen years previous..The owner, also the pilot on this trip, was pleased to be paid cash in advance, in crisp hundred-dollar bills, rather than by check or credit card. He accepted payment hesitantly, however, and with an unconcealed grimace, as though afraid of contracting a contagion from the currency. "What's wrong with your face?".Strangely, as sometimes happened in this room, his missing toe itched. There was no point in removing his shoe and sock to scratch the stump, because that would provide no relief. Curiously, the itch was in the phantom toe itself, where it could never be scratched..She shook her head. "No way back." She pointed to the sketch pad on the floor. "I pushed him there.".Because Harrison, with the best of intentions, had not wanted to open wounds, Cain could walk up to Celestina anywhere, anytime, and she wouldn't know that he might have been her sister's rapist. To her, his face was that of any stranger..In a minute or two, one of the cops returned, crouching close as the medics worked.

"There's no intruder." Junior said, "I should know your name from the playbill at the lounge, but I'm as bad with names as you are good with faces." Breath held, Celestina confirmed what she had suspected about the child since the quick glimpse she'd had in the surgery. Its skin was cafe au lait with a warming touch of caramel. Yet, uncaught, the quarter would have dropped to the floor. Junior would have heard it ring off the tiles. Which he hadn't. A cast-bronze figure, fixed to lacquered walnut in want of raw dogwood, suffered above the bed. This crucifix, contrasting starkly with the white walls, reinforced the impression of monastic economy. Junior descended the escalator two steps at a time, not content to let it carry him along at its own pace. When he reached the second floor, however, he found that Vanadium's ghost had done what ghosts do best: faded away. Abandoning his search for the perfect tie chain but determined to remain calm, Junior decided to have lunch at the St. Francis Hotel. To Dr. Parkhurst, Vanadium said, "In my work, I see lots of people who've just lost loved ones. None of them has ever puked like Vesuvius." Celestina indicated to Tom that he should sit at the head of the table, facing Agnes at the foot. As Wally lowered himself into the empty chair to Tom's left, Celestina picked up two items from the sideboard and put them in front of Tom, before sitting to his right. Lipscomb said, "We're only two and a half blocks from the best Armenian restaurant in the city. I'll dash over there, bring back some chilled bubbly and an early dinner, if you'll allow me." Yet his curious attraction to these newborns kept him at the window, and he began to believe that unconsciously he had intended to come here from the moment he guided his walker out of his room. He'd been compelled to come. Drawn by some mysterious magnetism. Because he hadn't heard Victoria Bressler speak in so long-and then only on two occasions-and because the woman on the phone had spoken so softly, Junior couldn't tell whether or not their voices were one and the same. "So do I, honey. Oh, Lord, so do I." She kissed his forehead. "Listen, kiddo, in spite of their stories and all their funny ways, your uncles are good men." When together in Agnes's company, Edom and Jacob were brothers, comfortable with each other. But together, just the two, no Agnes, they were more awkward than strangers, because strangers had no shared history to overcome. "Brush your teeth, too," Celestina said, leaning against the jamb in the open doorway. No one in Junior's circles seemed to care about the crisis in American music. He supposed he had a greater awareness of injustice than did most people. Atop the dead woman, Vanadium's leather ID holder ignited. The identification card would bum, but the badge was not likely to melt. The police would also identify the revolver. At many houses, strings of Christmas lights painted patterns of color at the eaves, around the window frames, and along the porch railings-all so blurred by fog that Junior seemed to be moving through a dreamscape with Japanese lanterns.

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