

## CONVOLUTED TALES 20

Nothing in his reading offered a satisfactory explanation for what had been happening to him. None of the women filled the hole in his heart, and all of the Bartholomews were harmless. Only the needlepoint offered any satisfaction, but though Junior was proud of his craftsmanship, he knew that a grown man couldn't find fulfillment in stitchery alone..Of the things you couldn't have seen coming, I'm the worst ... I'm the worst ... I'm the worst.....Moving out of the doorway, into the bedroom, he said, "What book would that be?" He'd listened to the message and thought it incomprehensible, of no import. Suddenly, tardy intuition told him that it could not have been any more important to him if it had been dead Naomi calling from beyond the grave to leave testimony for the detective..So these are reports of my explorations and discoveries: tales from Earthsea for those who have liked or think they might like the place, and who are willing to accept these hypotheses: things change: authors and wizards are not always to be trusted: nobody can explain a dragon.."I'm paying," Celestina insisted when they were seated. "I'm now a successful artist, with untold numbers of critics just waiting to savage me."Suitcases seemed to be missing. Some clothes, as well. Could mean a weekend vacation..Junior took two steps toward him, sighting the gun on his face. "Why should I be afraid of a stumbling blind boy no bigger than a midget?""-and wherever he went, between his shows, he always gave free performances at nursing homes, schools for the deaf-".Turning his patched eyes in the general direction of his mother, Barty said, "Oops."..Music played within. An up-tempo number. Possibly swing. He couldn't quite identify the tune..Into the autumn of 1967, Junior reviewed hundreds of thousands of phone listings, and occasionally he located a rare Bartholomew. In San Rafael or Marinwood. In Greenbrae or San Anselmo. Located and investigated and cleared them of any connection with Seraphim White's bastard baby..Thereafter, he was repelled at the prospect of kissing her, and their relationship fell apart..Tom plucked the quarter off the glass, folded it into his right fist, and then at once opened his hand, which was now empty.."That's exactly how I hoped he would be." Relieved, he followed Agnes to the living room. "Listen, Aggie, you know, I don't have anything against Jacob, but-".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 agreement, Maria pushed the stack of unused cards aside, and she peered at her hands as if she wanted to scrub them for a long time under hot water..The rocking chair stopped squeaking under her. She heard the sincerity in Vinnie's voice, and as her disbelief dissolved, she was shocked into immobility. She whispered, "My little superstition."..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.."Dr. Lipscomb delivered the baby like two minutes ago. The afterbirth hasn't even been removed yet," the nurse informed her.."As she comes closer to full term," said Dairies, "she's at great risk of preeclampsia developing into full eclampsia."..We cherish the old stories for their changelessness. Arthur dreams eternally in Avalon. Bilbo can go "there and back again," and "there" is always the beloved familiar Shire. Don Quixote sets out forever to kill a windmill... So people turn to the realms of fantasy for stability, ancient truths, immutable simplicities..The past three years had given Wally much to celebrate, as well. After selling his medical practice and taking an eight-month hiatus from the sixty-hour work weeks he had endured for so long, he'd been giving twenty-four hours of free service to a pediatric clinic each week, providing care to the disadvantaged. He'd worked hard all his life, and saved diligently, and now he was able to focus solely on those activities that gave him the greatest gratification..Agnes at last relented. "Someday, you're going to have to learn to relax, Maria."..Celestina, the battering Baptist, back in action, came at him again. With one leg broken, another cracked, and the stretcher bar splintered, the chair wasn't as formidable a weapon as it had been. She swung it, Junior dodged, she struck at him again, he juked, and she reeled away from him, gasping..Now he had to focus on being ready for the evening of January 12: the reception for Celestina White's art show. She had adopted her sister's baby. Little Bartholomew was in her care; and soon, the kid would be within Junior's reach..That Olympian purge had, however, made him appear to be both emotionally and physically devastated by the loss of his wife. He couldn't have calculated any stratagem more likely to convince most..Leaning across the front seat, he lowered the passenger's window six inches. Then he lowered the driver's-side window an equal distance.."It was... the only dream that mattered," Joey said. "You ... loving me. It was a good life because of you."..being careful to place the point of impact precisely where the bottle had struck her..Closing her eyes, Agnes whispered, "Bartholomew," in a reverent voice full of wonder, full of awe..Looking down at Barty, Agnes saw the ghost of Joey in the baby's face, and although she half believed that her husband would be alive now if he had never tempted fate by putting such a high price on his wife, she couldn't find any anger in her heart for him. She must accept this final generosity with grace-if also without enthusiasm..Agnes got out of bed, switched on the lamp, and tucked Barty in once more. "Say your silent prayers.".."Wrong about what, sugarpie smooosh--smooosh?" Celestina asked as Wally pulled to the curb again and parked..While Jacob had shuffled, Agnes had taken little Barty from his bassinet into her arms. She was surprised and discomfited to discover that the baby was to have his fortune told first..Breath repeatedly catching in her throat, heart thudding, Agnes watched her son through the open car door..Celestina turned in her seat to look back at Wally and Angel, who were waving. "I guess I am."..Lifted from his despair by this exhilarating wrath, Junior turned away from the mirror, looking for the bright side once more. Perhaps it was the bathroom window..For a while, Celestina had worried that the girl was slower to walk than other children, slower to talk, and slower to develop her vocabulary, even though Celestina read aloud to her from storybooks every day. Then, during the past six months, Angel had caught up in a rush

though she traveled a road somewhat different from what the childrearing books described. Her first word was mama, which was fairly standard, but her second was blue, which for a while came out "boo." At three, an average child would be doing exceptionally well to identify four colors; Angel could name eleven, including black and white, because she was able routinely to differentiate pink from red, and purple from blue..Agnes found this turn of events amazing, amusing, ironic-and a little sad. She would have dearly loved to teach the boy to read and write, to see his knowledge and competence slowly flower under her care. Although she fully supported Barty's exploration of his gifts, and although she was proud of his astounding achievements, she felt that his swift advancement was robbing her of some of the shared joy of his childhood, even though he remained in so many ways a child..While Junior had been hospitalized , Vanadium had searched his lace, with or without a warrant. Turnabout was satisfying..Walking was part of a fitness regimen that he took seriously. He would never be called upon to save the world, like the pulp heroes in the tales he enjoyed; however, he had solemn responsibilities he was determined to meet, and to do so, he must maintain good health..He suspected the blame lay with his exceptional sensitivity to violence, death, and loss. Previously it manifested as an explosive emptying of the stomach, this time as a purging of lower realms..Coughing, spitting saliva that was bitter with toxic chemicals, Paul followed her, slapping frantically at his clothes when fire singed his shirt..Unquestionably, if he hadn't killed Vanadium, the maniac cop would have blown him away. That was clearly an act of self-defense..This time, he vowed never to kill again, except in self-defense, regardless of the provocation. This tougher condition pleased him. No one achieved significant self-improvement by setting low standards for himself.The expectation with which Tom had been greeted on his arrival was as thin as the air at Himalayan heights compared to the rich stew of anticipation now aboil..On the two-chair bed beside her mother, Angel issued small cries of distress in her sleep. Whatever presences flocked around her in the dream, they weren't baby chickens..At home, Agnes had no appetite, but she fixed Barty a cheese sandwich, spooned potato salad into a dish, added a bag of corn chips and a Coke, and served this late dinner on a tray, in his room, where he was already in bed and reading Tunnel in the Sky..If the nun and the nurse could know the loathing that Celestina had felt earlier, they would never allow her here in the creche, never trust her with this newborn.. "Oh, it certainly is! It certainly is enough! But ... I don't regret much, you know. But I do regret not being here to see why you and Angel have been brought together. I know it'll be something lovely, Barty. Something so fine." "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." She poured cold milk and drank it quickly. As she was rinsing the empty glass, she felt as if she might throw up, but she didn't..Raising one hand, wiggling the fingers, he said, "Toes, toes, toes, toes, toes." He was about to lift the body out of the chair when he heard the car in the driveway. He might not have caught the sound of the engine so distinctly and so early if the stereo had not been in the process of changing albums..The following day, Wednesday, December 27, his mother drove him to the library, where he checked out two Heinlein titles recommended by the librarian: Red Planet and The Rolling Stones. Judging by his excitement, on the way home in the car, his response to previous mystery-novel series had been a pleasant courtship, whereas this was desperate, undying love..The boy-wonder physician turned to Junior again and assumed an expression of compassion so inauthentic that if he'd been playing a doctor on even the cheesiest daytime soap opera, he'd have been stripped of his actor's-union card, fired, and possibly horsewhipped on a live television special. "We'll be doing the procedure this afternoon, so I wouldn't want to give you anything much for the pain just prior to anesthesia and sedation. But don't you worry, Mr. Pinchbeck. Once we've lanced these boils, when you wake up, ninety percent of the pain will be gone." His right side, however, had come to rest against an object harder than bagged paper, an angular mass. As the skull-rattling gong faded, allowing more clarity of thought, he realized that an unpleasant, vaguely warm, damp something was pressed against his right cheek..Dr. Chan's manner remained professional, providing the strength that Agnes required, but his pain was evident when his gentle voice softened further: "These tumors are so advanced, we won't know until surgery if the malignancy has spread. We may already be too late. And if we aren't too late, we'll have only a small window of opportunity. A small window. Eight days would entail too much risk." He usually ate lunch alone in his office. The room was the size of an elevator, but of course didn't go up or down. It went sideways, however, in the sense that herein Paul was transported into wondrous lands of adventure..Happy weekend. His attitude amazed her, and his strength in the face of darkness gave her courage..Eleven years later, a few months after marrying Agnes, Joey mysteriously invited Edom to accompany him on "a little drive," and took his bewildered brother-in-law to a nursery. They returned home with fifty pound bags of special mulch, jars of plant food, and an array of new tools. Together, they stripped the sod from the side yard, turned the soil, and prepared the ground for the rich variety of hybrid starter plants that were delivered the following week.. "Stop it, stop it! " Agnes, only ten years old, slender and shaking, but wild with righteousness, until now held in thrall by her own fear, by the memory of all the beatings that she herself has taken. She screams at their father and strikes him with a book she's brought from the house. The Bible. She strikes their father with the Bible, from which he's read to them every night of their lives. He drops the roses, tears the holy book out of Agnes's hands, and pitches it across the yard. He rakes up a handful of the scattered roses, intending to make his son resume this dinner of sin, but here comes Agnes once more, the Bible recovered, brandishing it at him, and now she says what all of them know to be true but what none of them has ever dared say, what even Agnes herself will never again dare to say after this day, not while the old man lives, but she dares to say it now, holding the Bible toward him, so he can see the gold-embossed cross upon the imitation-leather cover. "Murderer," Agnes says. "Murderer " And Edom knows that they're all as good as dead now, that their father will slaughter them right here, right this minute, in his rage. "Murderer," she says accusingly, behind the shield of the Bible, and she doesn't mean that he is killing Edom, but that he killed their mother, that they heard him in the night, three years before, heard the

short but awful struggle, and know that what happened was no accident. Roses fall from his skinned and pierced hands, a flurry of petals yellow and petals red. He rises and takes a step toward Agnes, his dripping fists crimson with his blood and with Edom's. Agnes doesn't back away, but thrusts the book toward him, and scintillant sunlight caresses the cross. Instead of tearing the book out of her hands again, their father stalks away, into the house, surely to return with club or cleaver ... yet they will see no more of him this day. Then Agnes—with tweezers for the thorns, with a basin full of warm water and a washcloth, with iodine and Neosporin and bandages—kneels beside him in the yard. Jacob, too, comes forth from the dark crawlspace under the porch, having watched in terror from behind the latticework skirt. He is shaking, crying, flushed with embarrassment because he didn't intervene, although he was wise to hide, for the disciplinary beating of one twin usually leads to the pointless beating of the other. Agnes gradually settles Jacob by involving him in the treatment of his brother's wounds, and to Edom she says, often thereafter, "I love your roses, Edom. I love your roses. God loves your roses, Edom." Overhead, agitated wings quiet to a soft flutter, and the shrieking crows grow silent. The air pools as still and heavy as the water in a hidden lagoon within a secret glade, in the perfect garden of the unfallen....When he reported for a physical and a reassessment of his draft classification, on Wednesday, December 15, he left the insert in his hitching shoe; however, he limped like old Walter Brennan, the actor, hitching around the ranch in *The Real McCoys*. Turning away from the window, Celestina grabbed the girl and pushed her toward the bed, whispering, "Down, under." LEFT HAND ON the banister, right hand with knife tucked close to his side and ready to thrust, Tom Vanadium climbed cautiously but quickly to the upper floor, glancing back twice to be sure that Cain didn't slip in behind him. Junior glanced over his shoulder even as Celestina turned and fled. He caught only a glimpse of her disappearing into the inner hallway. She slipped into her shoes and stood for a moment watching his lips move as he gave thanks for his blessings and as he asked that blessings be given to others who needed them. She lost track of him. Fear knocked, knocked, on the door of her heart, because she was sure that he had vanished the way ships supposedly disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle. "I'm gifted to a small extent, and it's an unusual gift," he admitted. "Nothing world-shaking. More than anything, really, it's a special perception I've been given. Angel's gift seems to be different from mine but related. In fifty years, she's the first I've ever met who's somewhat like me. I'm still shaking inside from the shock of finding her. But please, let's save this for Bright Beach and a better evening. You go down there tomorrow with Paul, okay? I'll stay here to look after Wally. When he's able to travel, I'll bring him with me. I know you'll want him to hear what I have to say, too. Is it a deal?" 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. By lunch, he had turned the final page, and he was so full of the tale that he seemed to have no room for food. While his mother kept reminding him to eat, he regaled her with the details of John Thomas Stuart's great adventures with LummoX, as though every word that Heinlein had written were not science fiction, but truth. "What do you think of the exhibition," Junior asked, taking one step toward the musician, crowding him. In the execution, he was likewise scrupulous, for he didn't want the grownups to see what Angel saw; he preferred they believe it was sleight of hand—or magic. After the usual moves, he briefly closed his right hand around the coin, then with a snap of his wrist, flung it at Angel, simultaneously distracting with flourishes aplenty. Celestina sensed an easy camaraderie between these two men, but also tension that was perhaps related to the reference to an illegal search. Now, twenty-four hours later, when Sparky answered his telephone and heard Tom Vanadium, he said, "You looking for a little company? I've got another bottle of Merlot where the last one came from." Later, at home, after Agnes sent Edom back to his apartment, she opened a bottle of vodka that she had bought on the way back from Maria's. She mixed it with orange juice in a waterglass. The search for Cain was secondary. Getting to the revolver took Priority. Regain the gun and then proceed room by haunted room to hunt him down. Hunt him down, if he was here. And if Cain didn't do the hunting first. During the drive, he alternated between great gales of delighted laughter and racking sobs wrought by pain and self-pity. The voodoo Baptist was dead, the curse broken with the death of he who had cast it. Yet Junior must endure this final devastating plague. The walls were barren. The only art in these rooms was a single sculpture. Junior was taking university extension courses in art appreciation and almost daily haunting the city's countless galleries, constantly deepening and refining his knowledge. He intended to refrain from acquiring a collection until he was as expert on the subject as any director of any museum in the city. In his masterpiece *The Beauty of Rage: Channel Your Anger and Be a Winner*, Zedd explains that every fully evolved man is able to take anger at one person or thing and instantly redirect it to any new person or thing, using it to achieve dominance, control, or any goal he seeks. Anger should not be an emotion that gradually arises again at each new justifiable cause, but should be held in the heart and nurtured, under control but sustained, so that the full white-hot power of it can be instantly tapped as needed, whether or not there has been provocation. By "all of that," he meant the groceries that she and Joey often sent along with the pies, the occasional mortgage payment they made for someone down on his luck, and the other quiet philanthropies. With his mother, his uncles, and Maria hovering just two steps behind, Barty followed the driveway, not bothering with the cane, keeping his right foot on the concrete, his left foot on the grass, until he came to a jog in the pavement, which apparently he'd been seeking. He stopped, facing due north, considered for a moment, and then pointed due west: "The oak tree's over there." This comment left Tom nonplussed. He could only imagine that Jacob had known someone who died in that crash—yet the twin's tone of voice and his expression seemed to suggest that a world without the Bakersfield train wreck would be a less convivial place than one that included it. A sofa and one armchair provided the seating in the living room. No coffee table. A small table beside the chair. A wall unit held a fine stereo system and a few hundred record albums. The black service road seemed to come out of nowhere, then to vanish into a void, and Junior suddenly felt dangerously isolated, alone as he had never been, and vulnerable. In his seventies but vigorous and full of fun, Sparky liked to take an

occasional jaunt to Reno, to pump the slot machines and try a few hands of blackjack. The off-the-record, tax-free monthly checks from Simon were gratefully received, ensuring the old man's cooperation with the conspiracy..The deejay announced song number four for the week: the Beatles' "She's a Woman." The Fab Four filled the Studebaker with music..The rough massage had only just begun to bring a little relief to Junior's legs when Sparky returned with six stoppered rubber bags full of ice. "This was all the bags they had down at the drugstore.".The young man raised his voice to be heard above the gobbling of the art turkeys. "No, sir. He just asked where the men's room was.".He was focused enough, in fact, to find Bob Chicane, kill the insulting bastard and get away with it..They had a few days for quiet celebration of this astonishing recovery of his sight, and in that time, she never tired of watching him read to her. He didn't think she even listened closely. It was the fact of him made whole that lifted her spirits so high as they were now, not any writer's words nor any story ever written..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..When his search of the desk drawers was only half completed, the telephone rang-not the usual strident bell, but a modulated electronic brrrrr. He had no intention of answering it..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.". "For the love of God," Junior pleaded, "can't you please give me something for the pain?".Barty rode with his mother in her green Chevrolet station wagon. Because the cakes, pies, and gifts were too numerous to be contained in one vehicle, Edom followed them in his flashier yellow-and-white '54 Ford Country Squire..Then came the Year of the Tiger, 1974. Gasoline shortages, panic buying, mile-long lines at service stations. Patty Hearst kidnapped. Nixon gone in disgrace. Hank Aaron toppled Babe Ruth's longstanding home-run record, and the inflation rate topped fifteen percent, and the legendary Muhammad Ali defeated George Foreman to regain his world-heavyweight title..He had learned many things about himself on this momentous day--that he was more spontaneous than he had ever before realized, that he was willing to make grievous short-term sacrifices for long-term gain, that he was bold and daring-but perhaps the most important lesson was that he was a more sensitive person than he'd previously perceived himself to be and that this sensitivity, while admirable, was liable to undo him unexpectedly and at inconvenient times.. "Does my dad like Christmas?" Barty asked, sitting on the grave grass in front of the headstone.. "In cases like this, the malignancy is often more advanced in one eye than the other. If the size of the tumor requires it, we remove the eye containing the greatest malignancy, and we treat the remaining eye with radiation.".A siren in the city wailed toward St. Mary's. An ambulance. Through streets bustling with hope, always this lament for the dying..Certain disbelief insulated her against immediate surprise. She shook her head. "That's not possible.".The white Buick glided through the tides of fog like a ghost ship plying a ghost sea..Bob gently encouraged him to return by degrees from the deep meditative state, return, return, return..... "Honey," she said, crouching to peer at him through the vertical slats of the playpen, "what're you doing?".When he located the new grave, approximately where he'd guessed that it would be, he was surprised to find a black granite headstone already set in place, instead of a temporary marker painted with the..With some sharp instrument, probably a knife, Cain had stabbed and gouged the red letters, working on the wall with such fury that two of the Bartholomews were barely readable anymore. The Sheetrock was marked by hundreds of scores and punctures..Barty whispered: "The North Pole Society of Not Evil Adventurers is now in session.".From the corn soup to the baked ham to the plum pudding, he did not speak of his dry walk in wet weather..Simon Magusson, lacking family, had left his estate to Tom. This came as a surprise. The sum was so considerable that even though Tom was on a dispensation from his vows, which included his vow of property, he was uncomfortable with his fortune. His comfort was quickly restored by contributing the entire inheritance to Pie Lady Services. They had been brought together by two extraordinary children, by the conviction that Barty and Angel were part of some design of enormous consequence. But more often than not, God weaves patterns that become perceptible to us only over long periods of time, if at all. After the past three eventful years, there were now no weekly miracles, no signs in the earth or sky, no revelations from burning bushes or from more mundane forms of communication. Neither Barty nor Angel revealed any new astonishing talents, and in fact they were as ordinary as any two young prodigies can be, except that he was blind and she served as his eyes upon the world..Raising his revolver, Tom squeezed off two shots, but the gun didn't discharge..pending storm gathered as if called forth by a curse cooked up from eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, and tongue of dog..Maybe he would get lucky, and an airliner would fall out of the sky right now, right here, obliterating him in an instant..For a long time, she sat alone in the dark living room, in the armchair that had been Joey's favorite, thinking about many things but returning often to the memory of Barty's dry walk in wet weather..altogether by taking slow deep breaths, slow deep breaths, and by remembering that each of us has a right to be happy, to be fulfilled, to be free of fear..In the sermon that brought him a moment of fame that he'd found more uncomfortable than not, Daddy had used the life of Bartholomew to illustrate his point that every day in every life is of the most profound importance. Bartholomew is arguably the most obscure of the twelve disciples. Some would say Lebbaeus is less known, some might even point to Thomas the doubter. But Bartholomew certainly casts a shadow far shorter than those of Peter, Matthew, James, John, and Philip. Daddy's purpose in proclaiming Bartholomew the most obscure of the twelve was then to imagine in vivid detail how that apostle's actions, seemingly of little consequence at the time, had resonated down through history, through hundreds of millions of lives-and then to assert that the life of each chambermaid listening to this sermon, the life of each car mechanic, each teacher, each truck driver, each waitress, each doctor, each janitor, was as important as the resonant life of Bartholomew, although each dwelt beyond the lamp of fame and labored without the applause of multitudes..Matching her fierce attention with a sudden intensity of his own, Joey said, "Bartholomew.". "No. Rowena dropped those names after the twins' first year. She and I were the only ones who ever used

them. Our private little joke. Even the boys wouldn't have remembered." The verdant hills to the east lay like slumbering giants under blankets of winter grass, bright in the morning sun. But when the shadows of clouds sailed off the sea and gathered inland, the slopes darkened to a blackish green, as somber as shrouds, and a landscape that had appeared to be sleeping forms now looked dead and cold. An overflow crowd of mourners had attended the services at St. Thomas's Church, standing shoulder to shoulder at the back of the nave, through the narthex, and across the sidewalk outside, and now everyone appeared to have come to the cemetery, as well. Moving around the front of the station wagon, waving at his mother, reveling in her astonishment, Barty shouted, "Not scary!" "As long as the case was open and you were the sole suspect," said the lawyer, "they couldn't negotiate an out-of-court settlement with you. But they were afraid that if eventually they couldn't prove you killed her, then they'd be in an even worse position when a wrongful death suit finally went before a jury." Those ominous words again, turning through his memory, reel to reel. This time he actually heard them spoken. The voice commanded minded attention with a deeper timbre and crisper diction than his own. Agnes knew now why this prognostication had dismayed rather charmed her: If you dared to believe in the good fortune predicted he cards, then you were obliged to believe in the bad, as well. After tucking the flashlight under his belt, he grabbed the lip of the Dumpster with both hands. The metal was gritty, cold, and wet. When the attorney finally came on the line, he sounded put-upon, as though Junior were the equivalent of a troublesome toe that he would like to shoot off. Shaking her head, Celestina said, "I can only pay for a studio apartment, something small."

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