

FIRST FAMILIES OF THE SIERRAS

"It's just ... the last time I saw him, he trapped me in a corner and told this god awful story, far more than I wanted to know, about some British murderer back in the forties, this monstrous man who beat people to death with a hammer, drank their blood, then disposed of their bodies in a vat of acid in his workroom." He shuddered..She couldn't explain her anxiety to him, because he believed in the supremacy of laws, in the justice that might be delivered in this life, in a comparatively simple reality, and he would not comprehend the gloriously, frighteningly, reassuringly, strangely, and deeply complex reality Agnes occasionally perceived-usually peripherally, sometimes intellectually, but often with her heart. This was a world in which effect could come before cause, in which what seemed to be coincidence was, in fact, merely the visible part of a far larger pattern that couldn't be seen whole.."I was once doubting Thomas," said the detective, but not from beside the bed any longer. His voice seemed to come from across the room, perhaps near the door, though he had made not a sound as he'd moved..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.."I see. Sometimes. Just quick. For like a blink. Like when you stand between two mirrors. You know?".After using a paring knife to section and core an apple, Paul withdrew a sheet of stationery from his desk and uncapped a fountain pen. His penmanship was old-fashioned -in its neatness, as precise and appealing as fine calligraphy. He wrote: Dear Reverend WhiteThe corroded casement-operating mechanism began to give way, as did the hinges, and the window sagged outward..The cop had picked up the .22 pistol, using a pencil through the trigger guard, to prevent the destruction of fingerprints..Neither of them was aware that their personal drama, in all its clumsiness and glory, had focused the attention of everyone in the restaurant. The cheer that went up at Celestina's acceptance of his proposal caused her to start, knocking the ring from Wally's hand as he attempted to slip it on her finger. The ring bounced across the table, they both grabbed for it, Wally made the catch, and this time she was properly betrothed, to wild applause and laughter..When Agnes and Paul returned from a honeymoon in Carmel, they discovered that Edom had finally cleared out Jacob's apartment. He donated his twin's extensive files and books to a university library that was building a collection to satisfy a growing professorial and student interest in apocalyptic studies and paranoid philosophy..Celestina expected to be taken to a waiting room, but instead the nun escorted her to surgical prep..The sirens shrieked so loud that he felt a sympathetic vibration in his dental fillings, and with a sharp cry of brakes, a great red truck turned the corner, at once followed by a second..Consequently, he scheduled more time every day with the phone books. He had obtained directories for all nine counties that, with the city itself, comprised the Bay Area..At this extreme end of town, no streetlamps lit the pavement. With only moonlight to reveal him, he wasn't likely to be recognized if anyone happened to glance out a window..Since dealing with Victoria and the detective, Junior had taken pride in the fact that he'd kept his equanimity and, more important, his lunch. No acute nervous emesis, as he'd suffered following poor Naomi's death. Indeed, he had an appetite.."Where did it go?" Grace asked her granddaughter, making as much effort as she could to lighten the mood for the girl's sake..Vanadium's smile, in that tragically fractured face, might have alarmed most people, but Kathleen found it appealing because of the indestructible spirit it revealed..Easter still lay a few weeks away, but already Celestina had begun decorating more than a hundred baskets, so that nothing would need to be done at the last minute except add the candy. Her living room was a warren of baskets, ribbons, bows, beads, bangles, shredded cellophane in green and purple and yellow and pink, and decorative little plush-toy bunnies and baby chicks..Through her efforts, the Bright Beach Public Library sponsored an ambitious oral-history project financed by two private foundations and by an annual strawberry festival. Local retirees were enlisted to record the stories of their lives, so that their experiences, insights, and knowledge wouldn't be lost to generations yet unborn..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..All he cared about was Red Planet, and what might happen after page 103. He had carried the book with him to the doctor's office, and on the way home in the car; he repeatedly opened it, squinting at the lines of type, trying to read around or through the "twisty" spots. "Jim and Frank and Willis, they're in deep trouble.".Barty wore elfin-size, knitted blue pajamas complete with feet, white rickrack at the cuffs and neckline, and a matching cap. His white blanket was decorated with blue and yellow bunnies..After examining Barty, Dr. Schurr sent them to the hospital for further tests. There they spent the rest of the day, except for an hour break during which they ate lunch in a burger joint..He knew that the only movement in those staring, sightless eyes was the restless reflection of the flashlight beam as he probed the trash with it. He knew he was being irrational, but nevertheless he was reluctant to turn his back on the corpse. Repeatedly in the midst of searching, he snapped his head up, whipping his attention to Neddy, certain that from the corner of his eye, he had seen the dead gaze following him..In the chilly darkness, his breath plumed visibly, frosted by moonlight. The rapidity and raggedness of his radiant exhalations would have marked him as a guilty man if witnesses had been present..Any reasonable person would agree that the line between legitimate and harassment was hair-thin..He nodded. "The effect not only comes before a cause in this case, but completely without a cause. The effect is staying dry in the rain, but the cause-supposedly walking in a dryer world-never occurs. Only the idea of it.".She only half understood their frantic conversation, partly because the ability to concentrate was draining from her along with her lifeblood, but also because she was distracted by Joey.

He was no longer in the wreck, but standing at the open rear door of the ambulance..From her reading, she knew that amniotic fluid should be clear. A few traces of blood in it should not necessarily be alarming, but here were more than traces. Here were thick red-black streams..Looking from one to another of his companions, Tom said, "When I think of everything that had to happen to bring us here tonight, the tragedies as well as the happy turns of fortune, when I think of the many ways things might have been, with all of us scattered and some of us never having met, I know we belong here, for we've arrived against all odds." His gaze traveled back to Agnes, and he gave her the answer that he knew she hoped to hear. "This boy and this girl were born to meet, for reasons only time will reveal, and all of us ... we're the instruments of some strange destiny."..As best he could, he examined his clothes. They were better pressed than he expected, and not noticeably soiled..He was, in fact, a first-rate driver, with an impeccable record at the age of thirty: no traffic citations, no accidents.."There's a fine George and Ira Gershwin song called 'Someone to Watch Over Me.'The bitch was getting tired, but Junior still didn't like his odds in a hand-to-hand confrontation. Her hair was disarranged. Her eyes flashed with such wildness that he was half convinced he saw elliptical pupils like those of a jungle cat. Her lips were skinned back from her teeth in a snarl..As impressed as Agnes had been with the sample orbs that she'd been shown, she allowed no hope that the singular beauty of Barty's striated emerald-sapphire eyes would be re-created. Although the artist's work might be exquisite, these irises would be painted by human hands, not by God's..Angel moved her hand to Barty's right eye, and again he didn't twitch with surprise when her fingers lightly touched his closed and sagging lid. "I won't let you forget."..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?"..Spinning off the stool, the bun cap in one hand and the mustard dispenser clutched in the other, Junior surveyed the long narrow diner. Looking for the maniac cop. The dead maniac cop. He half expected to see Thomas Vanadium: head crusted in blood, face bashed to pulp, caked in quarry silt, and dripping water as though he'd climbed out of his Studebaker coffin just minutes ago.."Sit down, sit down," Agnes urged. "I can offer coffee now and pie in a little bit."..Frantically, he squirmed around on the floor until he was facing the entrance to the kitchen. Through tears of pain, he expected to see a Frankensteinian shadow loom in the hall, and then the creature itself, gnashing its fork-tine teeth, its corkscrew nipples spinning.."As I explained, he might have thought I was you," Edom said, staring at the neatly ordered volumes on the nearby bookshelves..Halfway home, he heard sirens and saw the beacons of approaching emergency vehicles. He pulled the Suburban to the side of the road and watched as two fire trucks passed, followed by an ambulance..The muscles of his legs grew as hard as any of the landscapes that he trod. Granite thighs; calves like marble, roped with veins.."Well, Uncle Jacob doesn't understand kids. Anyway, this is pretty good stuff.".."No," Otter said, and hesitated. He felt he owed this man an explanation. "See, it's not so much won't as can't. I thought of making plugs in the planking of that galley, near the keel-you know what I mean by plugs? They'd work out as the timbers work when she gets in a heavy sea." Hound nodded. "But I couldn't do it. I'm a shipbuilder. I can't build a ship to sink. With the men aboard her. My hands wouldn't do it. So I did what I could. I made her go her own way. Not his way."..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..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..In spring, summer, and fall, they brightened the grave with the roses that Edom grew in the side yard. In this less rose-friendly season, these Christmas bouquets had been purchased at a flower shop..So. Two monks they were: one in the service of everlasting light, the other in the service of eternal darkness..THE MORNING THAT it happened was bright and blue in March, two months after Barty took Angel for a dry walk in wet weather, seven weeks after Celestina married Wally, and five weeks after the happy newlyweds completed their purchase of the Galloway house next door to the Lampion place. Selma Galloway, retired from a professorship years earlier, had subsequently retired further, taking advantage of the equity in her long-owned home to buy a little condo on the beach in nearby Carlsbad..Your deeds ... will return to you, magnified beyond imagining ... the spirit of Bartholomew ... will find you ... and mete out the terrible judgment that you deserve..Sliding Victoria's chair away from the table, he turned her to face him. He adjusted her body so that her head was tipped back and her arms were hanging slack at her sides..Frequently, these days, she found herself explaining aspects of life to Barty that she hadn't expected to discuss for years to come. She wondered how she could make him understand this: Life can be so sweet, so full, that sometimes happiness is nearly as intense as anguish, and the pressure of it in the heart swells close to pain..Celestina rose, heart suddenly clumping in her breast, like heavy footsteps hurrying away from an approaching bearer of bad news, but she herself couldn't run, could only stand rooted in her hope-and hear in her mind six versions of a bleak prognosis in the two seconds before the doctor actually spoke..Barty wanted to hug her. He did hug her. He hugged Angel, too. He hugged Tom Vanadium.."Why? What was he going to get out of it?"..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..THOUGH OTHERS MIGHT see magic in the world, Edom was enthralled only by mechanism: the great destructive machine of nature grinding everything to dust. Yet wonder suddenly bloomed in him at the sight of the ace bearing his nephew's name..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?" "You know where it comes from," her mother said with a yawn that betrayed her exhaustion after a night with no sleep and too much drama..Regrettably, his radiant smile only emphasized, by contrast, the dire shortcomings of the face from which it beamed. Lumpish, pocked, wart-stippled, darkened by a permanent beard shadow with a bluish cast, this countenance was beyond the powers of redemption possessed by the best plastic surgeons in the world, which was no doubt why Nolly applied his resources strictly to dental work..As Wally got behind the wheel and closed his door, Angel said, "Mommy, where's fog come from? And don't say Hawaii." "From 1604 through 1610, Erzebet Bathory, sister of the Polish king, with the assistance of her servants, tortured and killed six hundred girls. She bit them, drank their blood, tore their faces off with tongs, mutilated their private parts, and mocked their screams." Tom opened his empty hands and then filled one of them with his water glass. The rattling ice belied his calm face..Eventually, when he had gone through the entire directory, if he'd had no success, he would phone each red-checked listing and ask for Bartholomew. A few hundred calls, no doubt. Some would involve long-distance charges, but he could afford the toll..Strapped to the bracing board, semi-immobilized to prevent the accidental dislodgement of the intravenous feed, Junior's right arm felt half numb, stiff from disuse.."It's chilly and foggy and late, and there might be villains afoot at this hour," he intoned with mock gravity. "The two of you are Lipscomb women now, or soon will be, and Lipscomb women never go unescorted through the dangerous urban night." To the waiter, Nolly was Nolly, Kathleen was Mrs. Wulfstan, and Tom Vanadium was sir--though not the usual perfunctorily polite sir, but sir with deferential emphasis. Tom was unknown to the waiter, but his shattered face gave him gravitas; besides, he possessed a quality, quite separate from carriage and demeanor and attitude, an ineffable something, that inspired respect and even trust.."We'll need to talk about this a lot in the days to come, as we both have more time to think about it." Barty's reading and writing skills appeared to be related to his talent for math, as well. To him, language was first phonics, a sort of music that symbolized objects and ideas, and this music was then translated into written "syllables using the alphabet-which he saw as a system of math employing twenty-six digits instead of ten..Room to room through the upstairs. Checking closets. Behind furniture. Bathrooms. In Paul's private spaces. No Cain..FOR THE BETTER PART of a week, on doctor's orders, Agnes avoided stairs. She took sponge baths in the ground-floor powder room and slept in the parlor, on a sofa bed, with Barty nearby in a bassinet..Still pretending sleep, Junior delighted in the realization that the detective himself had dragged a red herring across the trail and was now busily following this distracting scent..The lid of the cooler wasn't on as tight as it ought to have been. From around one edge slipped a thin and sinuous stream of smoke. Something on fire.."We want the scary one, 'specially if it has spiders, Pixie Lee said squeakily but defiantly.."No," Agnes said, shaking loose the grip of irrational fear. "Wait. This is absurd. It's just a card. And we're all curious." What if the stubborn, selfish, greedy, grubbing, vicious, psychotic, evil spirit of Thomas Vanadium, which had earlier pursued Junior through another alleyway in broad daylight, had followed him into this one in the more ghost-friendly hours of the night, and what if that spirit were standing just outside the Dumpster right now, and what if it closed the bifurcated lid and slipped a bolt through the latch rings, and what if Junior were trapped here with the thoroughly strangled corpse of Neddy Gnathic, and what if the flashlight failed when he tried to switch it on again, and then what if in the pitch-blackness he heard Neddy say, "Does anyone have a special request?". Another thought: The young gallery employee would remember that Junior had asked after Neddy and had followed him toward the men's room. He would provide a description, and because he was an art connoisseur, therefore visually oriented, he'd most likely provide a good description, and what the police artist drew wouldn't be some cubist vision in the Picasso mode or a blurry impressionistic sketch, but a portrait filled with vivid and realistic detail, like a Norman Rockwell painting, ensuring apprehension..The kitchen door stood open and full of light, but he missed it by two feet. He felt along the back wall of the house, discovered the door casing and then the opening, probed with the cane for the threshold, and stepped into the doorway..The investigator's suite-a minuscule waiting room and a small office-lacked a secretary but surely harbored all manner of vermin..Mechanics have reliably steady hands, yet Jacob's hands shook as he discarded two cards and slowly turned over the ninth draw..After a while, a voice broke the vacuum-perfect silence. Bob Chicane. His instructor..Agnes wasn't able to interpret his expression, not because he was in the least difficult to read, but because her perceptions were skewed by sudden fear and a flood of adrenaline. Her heart seemed to spin like a flywheel in her breast..Sitting at the desk, Celestina phoned her parents again. She shook uncontrollably, but her voice was steady..A nurse fussed over him as she helped him into bed, concerned about his paleness and his tremors. She was attentive, efficient, compassionate but she wasn't in the least attractive, and he wished she would..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..Junior liked women who drank a lot. They were usually amorous or at least unresistant..Now, after removing the four decks of cards from the pressboard packs in which they had come, Jacob lined them up side by side on the scarred maple top of the table..As Celestina settled on the sofa with the phone in her lap, hesitating to dial until she worked up a bit more courage, Angel said to Tom, "So what happened to your face?". Smiling in the fearless dark, she listened to the rhythmic breathing of a sleeping boy..In the face of his kindness, however, she couldn't refuse his request. She nodded..Nolly said, "We've never really had a song of our own, in spite of all the dancing we do. I think this is a good one. But so far, you've only sung it to another man." During the rest of that first year, he walked to Palm Springs and back, a round trip of more than two hundred miles, and north to Santa Barbara..Bracing her feet against the floorboards, clutching the seat with her left hand, fiercely gripping the door handle with her right, she prayed, prayed that the baby would be all

right, that she would live at least long enough to bring her child into this wonderful world, into this grand creation of endless and exquisite beauty, whether she herself lived past the birth or not..She was lost in his eyes: She wanted to pass through his eyes as Alice had passed through the looking glass, follow the beautiful radiance that was fading now, go with him through the door that had been opened for him and accompany him out of this rain-swept day into grace..Among Junior's many gifts, his ability to focus might have been the most important. Bob Chicane, his former instructor in matters meditative, had called him intense and even obsessive, following the painful incident involving meditation without seed, but intensity and obsession were false charges. Junior was simply focused.He vanished through some hole, some slit, some tear bigger than anything through which Tom flipped his quarters..If Cain had been attracted to one woman by her looks, surely he would be attracted to the other. And perhaps the sisters shared a quality other than beauty that drew Cain with even greater power. Innocence, perhaps, or goodness: both foods for a demon.. "Well, you're sweet, aren't you? And you're all bright red on the outside and milk chocolate inside," Celestina said, gently tweaking the girl's light brown nose..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..Indeed, the winter storm had dampened neither his hair nor his clothes. The rain appeared to slide away from him a millimeter before contact, as though the water and the man were composed of matter and antimatter that must either repel each other or, on contact, trigger a cataclysmic blast that would shatter the very foundation of the universe..not yet acknowledged, when our flailing species briefly floats insensate between one desperate swim and another..She shook her head. "No way back." She pointed to the sketch pad on the floor. "I pushed him there."..He met her eyes, but at once shifted his gaze to the porch floor again. "I've come to say ... how sorry I am, how miserably sorry."..THIS IS THE FIRST PAGE of the Book of the Dark, written some six hundred years ago in Berila, on Enlad:..Using the brochure as an ice-breaker, Junior circulated through the throng, seeking anyone who'd attended the..As hard of head as she was hard of heart, Victoria had not sustained serious brain damage, only a concussion..Having survived the night, Edom and Jacob were waiting in the hall. Each kissed his nephew, but neither could speak..force open Edom's mouth. "Eat your sin, boy, eat your sin!" Edom resists eating his sin, but he's afraid for his eyes, Lord, listen to me-but I've really got to know if you can, if you are, how you feel, whether you feel, I mean, whether you think you could feel--".Having shuffled all four stacks of cards, Jacob cut two decks and shuffled the halves together, controlling them exactly as he had controlled them on Friday evening. Then the other two halves..demons: hypodermoclysis ... intravenous oxytocin ... maintain perfect asepsis, and I mean perfect, at all times ... a few oral preparations of ergot as soon as it's safe to give her anything by mouth..He could have killed someone named Henry or Larry, without risk of creating a Bartholomew pattern that would prickle like a pungent scent in the hound-dog nostrils of Bay Area homicide detectives. But he restrained himself..Reaching between the slats, Agnes tickled the pink piggies on his left foot. "Toes."..He left the party and stood in the street for a while, taking slow deep breaths, letting the brisk night air clean the pot smoke out of his lungs, slow deep breaths, suddenly sober in spite of the beer he'd drunk, slow deep breaths, as chilled as a slab of beef in a meat locker, but not because of the cold night..When Paul practiced the quarter trick, he usually did so on the sofa or in an armchair, and always in a room with carpeting, because when dropped on a hard surface, the coin rolled and required too much chasing..His musical abilities were most likely an offshoot of his more extraordinary talent for math. He said that music was numbers, and what he seemed to mean was that he could all but instantly translate the notes of any song into a personal numerical code, retain it, and repeat the song by repeating the memorized sequence of code. When he read sheet music, he saw arrangements of numbers..dent? You do believe that? Because I don't see ... I don't know how could work with someone who thought I was capable of . . . ". "Maybe I won't have to try as hard as I think, because you make it so easy, Barty."..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..Murmuring on the edge of sleep, Barty spoke to his father in all the places where Joey still lived: "Good-night, Daddy."..Most of these firearms were loaded and ready for use, but five remained in their original boxes, in the back of her bedroom closet. Evidently, considering the original bill of sale taped to each of the five boxed handguns, she must have acquired all the weapons legally..Tom stared down into the oceanic depths of the city, through the reefs of buildings, to the lamp-fish cars schooling through the great trenches..Even above the piston-knock of her heart and the bellows-wheeze of her breath, Celestina heard wood crack, a small pane of glass explode, and metal torque with a squeal. The creep was going to get away..With the earth still tenuously stable beneath them, they arrived at their fifth destination, a new address on Agnes's mercy list.. "Joey was, after all, an insurance broker," Vinnie reminded her. "He was going to look out for his family."..For half an hour he studied Barty's eyes with various devices and instruments. Thereafter, he arranged an immediate appointment with an oncologist, as Joshua Nunn had predicted..The man's voice echoed hollowly in Junior's ears, as if coming from the far end of a tunnel. Or from the terminus of a death-row hallway, on the long walk between the last meal and the execution chamber..Shifting the Suburban out of park, Wally said, "I didn't know Baptists indulged in wagering."..Jacob's mentor had been a man named Obadiah Sepharad. They had met when Jacob was eighteen, during a period when he'd been committed to a psychiatric ward for a short time, his eccentricity having been briefly mistaken for something worse..He returned to the house and extinguished the three blown-glass oil lamps on the living-room coffee table. Out, as well, the silk-shade lamp..On one particular street in Bright Beach, however, the most significant event of the year occurred on a pleasant afternoon in early April, when Barty, now nine years old, climbed to the top of the great oak and perched there in triumph, king of the tree and master of his blindness..With her rock of faith under her, and

breathing hope as much as ever, she was nevertheless unable to be as strong for him as she wanted to be. She felt her face go soft, her mouth tremble, and when she tried to repress a sob, it burst from her with wretched force. The doors were unlocked on a pickup parked next to the Pontiac. Junior lifted the granny onto the front seat of the truck. She was so light, so unpleasantly angular, and she rustled so much that she might have been a new species of giant mutant insect that mimicked human appearance. He was glad, after all, that he hadn't killed her: Granny's prickly--bur spirit might have proved to be as difficult to eradicate as a cockroach infestation. With a shudder, he tossed her purse on top of her, and slammed the truck door. "But I had greater facility with cards than most magicians. I trained with Moses Moon, greatest card mechanic of his generation." Maybe every accidental death was suspicious to Vanadium. His obsessive hounding of Junior might be his standard operating procedure. "Me, I don't like anything old. This White chick's got a weird thing for old people, old buildings, old stuff in general. Like she doesn't realize she's young. You want to grab her, shake her, and say, 'Hey, let's move on,' you know?" "Well, anyway," she said, as though Muffins uncharacteristic viciousness had been adequately explained, "this mending ought to cover ten more lessons." "Get this through your head, you shit-for-brains. I lost a daughter, a precious daughter, my Naomi, the light of my life." In the living room, the central and largest window framed a magnificent view, and swagged silk brocatelle draperies framed the window. An oversize hand-painted and heavily gilded chaise lounge, upholstered in an exquisite tapestry, stood against this backdrop of city and silk, and Renee pulled Junior down upon the chaise, desperate to be ravished there. Currently, Jacob was far removed from the embalming chamber and intended never to set foot there, alive. With Walter Panglo as his guide, he toured the casket selection in the funeral-planning room. "Could you throw an Oreo someplace you weren't blind or maybe someplace Wally wasn't shot?" Neddy talked when Celestina paused for breath, talked over her when she didn't pause, heard only his own mellifluous voice and was pleased to conduct both sides of the conversation, wearing her down as surely as though far more rapidly than the sand-filled winds of Egypt diminished the pharaohs' pyramids. He talked through the first polite "Excuse me" of the tall man who stepped into the open doorway behind him, through the second and third, and then with an abruptness that was as miraculous as any cure at the shrine of Lourdes, he fell silent when the visitor put a hand on his shoulder, eased him gently aside, and entered the apartment. With the same surprising ease that she had gotten a plane out of San Francisco on a one-hour notice, Celestina booked two return seats on an early-evening flight from Oregon, as though she had a supernatural travel agent. In his head, without apparent effort, Barty kept a running total of the number of seconds that he had been alive, and of the number of words in every book that he read. Agnes never checked his word totals for an entire volume; however, when she cited any page in a book that he'd just finished, he knew the number of words it contained. He stopped straining to see through the black room to the corner armchair. He closed his eyes and tried to lull himself to sleep by summoning into his mind's eye a lovely but calculatedly monotonous scene of gentle waves breaking on a moonlit shore. This trick, however, was far more difficult than walking where the rain wasn't. Sustaining vision took both a mental and physical toll from him. Routinely she dreamed of Joey. Not nightmares. No blood, no reliving of the horror. In her dreams, she was on a picnic with Joey or at a carnival with him. Walking a beach. Watching a movie. A warmth pervaded these scenes, an aura of companionship, love. Except eventually she always glanced away from Joey, and when she looked again, he was gone, and she knew that he was gone forever. She wanted to tell him not to say these queer things, not to talk this way, yet she couldn't speak those words. When Barty asked her why, as inevitably he would, she'd have to say she was worried that something might be terribly wrong with him, but she couldn't express this fear to her boy, not ever. He was the lintel of her heart, the keystone of her soul, and if he failed because of her lack of confidence in him, she herself would collapse into ruin.

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