

THE LAST DOG OF WAR

Licky took him down into the mines to show him the gangues, the kinds of earth the ore was likely to occur in. A few miners were working at the end of a long level. Her voice was flat and a little hard. Another man might have mistaken her tone for disapproval, for impatience, even for quiet anger. Barty's release from Hoag Presbyterian had been delayed by an infection, and thereafter he had spent three days in a Newport-area rehabilitation hospital. Rehab consisted largely of orientation to his new dark world, since his lost function could not be recovered by either diligent exercise or therapy. Find the father, kill the son. In just nine days, Junior bedded four beautiful women: one on Christmas Eve, the next on Christmas Night, the third on New Year's Eve, and the fourth on New Year's Day. For the first time in his life-and on all four occasions-his joy in the act was less than complete. "I'll come by at eight o'clock for breakfast," Wally suggested. "We have to set a date." He had come to believe that every well-rounded, self-improved person ought to have a craft at which he excelled, and needlepoint appealed to him more than either pottery-making or decoupage. For pottery, he would require a potter's wheel and a cumbersome kiln; and decoupage was too messy, with all the glue and lacquer. By December, he began his first project: a small pillowcase featuring a geometric border surrounding a quote from Caesar Zedd, "Humility is for losers." From the bathroom, Junior gathered an electric razor and toiletries. He added these to the suitcases. Celestina stared out for a moment, and then turned her head to look at Tom, with both the shade of the night and the sparkle of the metropolis still captured in her eyes. "What was that all about?" Mrs. Lombardi had no visitors. She was alone in the world, her two children and her husband having passed away long ago. "It's even worse," Junior rasped, convinced that he was losing some indefinable advantage if the cop left without playing out this moment as it would usually unfold in an intellectual television crime drama like Perry Mason or Peter Gunn. But the boy played no tricks against his father. He took his beatings in silence and learned to hide his gift.-and wherever he went, between his shows, he always gave free performances at nursing homes, schools for the deaf-.2000, the Year of the Dragon, gives way without a roar to the Year of the Snake, and after the Snake comes the Horse. Day by day the work is done, in memory of those who have gone before us, and embarked upon work of her own, young Mary is out there among you. For now, only her family knows how very special she is. On one momentous day, that will change. Initially, when told that his patient was a Negro, Junior had been reluctant to serve as her physical therapist. Her program of rehab required mostly structured exercise to restore flexibility and to gain strength in the affected limb, but some massage would be involved, as well, which made him uncomfortable. . . . then how come you couldn't walk where your eyes were healthy and leave the tumors there," she remembered. "And how about this," he continued. "Every point in the universe is directly connected to every other point, regardless of distance, so any point on Mars is, in some mysterious way, as close to me as is any of you. Which means it's possible for information-and objects, even people-to move instantly between here and London without wires or microwave transmission. In fact, between here and a distant star, instantly. We just haven't figured out how to make it happen. Indeed, on a deep structural level, every point in the universe is the same point. This interconnectedness is so complete that a great flock of birds taking flight in Tokyo, disturbing the air with their wings, contributes to weather changes in Chicago." "Maybe I won't have to try as hard as I think, because you make it so easy, Barty." In spite of its dazzle and power and comfort, however, the car was not able to lift his spirits as he cruised the hills of the city. Somewhere along these darkly glistening streets, in these houses and high-rises clinging to steep slopes awaiting seismic sundering, the boy was sheltered: half Negro, half white, full doom to Junior Cain. Unable to speak, the girl kissed her and then gently placed her head against Agnes's breast, capturing forever in memory the pure sound of her heart. THE SUN ROSE above clouds, above fog, and with the gray day came a silver drizzle. The city was lanced by needles of rain, and filth drained from it, swelling the gutters with a poisonous flood. "Your forgiveness won't make any of it right," he said, "nothing could, but it might start to give me a little peace." The subtle distortions in his vision, which caused lines of type to twist, didn't appear to trouble Barty much otherwise. He moved as quickly and as surely as ever, with his special grace. Charmed by the vulnerability of the young, he'd never slept with an older woman. The prospect intrigued him. She would have tricks in her repertoire that younger women were too inexperienced to know. Her lifelong optimism, her buoyancy, which she had miraculously sustained through so many difficult years, would never survive this. She would no longer be a rock of hope for him and Edom. Their future was despair, undiluted and unrelenting. Perched on a chair with two plump bed pillows to boost her, Angel extracted one crisp strip from her club sandwich and asked Tom, "Where's bacon come from?" Celestina looked out a kitchen window and saw Agnes in the Lampion driveway, where the three-vehicle caravan was assembled. She was loading her station wagon. As if a door had briefly opened between this windless day and another world, a single gust rattled rain against the windows. After a few racing steps, when the dog realized that Mary hadn't thrown the ball, it whipped around and sprinted back. This back blow wasn't just sport, either, but more like Vietnam as lie sometimes told women that he remembered it. As though pitched by a grenade blast, Junior went from his feet to the floor with chin-rapping impact, teeth guillotining together so hard that he would have severed his tongue if it had been between them. 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 don't ... don't understand." Blinking sleepily, pretending to be still thickheaded from tranquilizers and whatever other drugs they were dripping into his veins, Junior was pleased by the note of perplexity in his hoarse voice, although he knew that even an Oscar-caliber performance would not win over this critic. Frankness and tough talk pleased her, because too many people dealt with her as though her spirit were

as frail as her limbs. She laughed with delight-but still refused him..After examining Phimie, who was nauseous, Daines prescribed an anticonvulsant, an antiemetic, and a sedative, all intravenously..Suddenly and seriously crept out, Junior wanted to get away from this nut case. Yet he was frozen by morbid fascination..Prudence required that they strategize as though Enoch Cain were Satan himself, as though every fly and beetle and rat provided eyes and ears for the killer, as though ordinary precautions could never foil him..At Thanksgiving dinner, again at the three tables set end to end, in the year of the triple zero, Mary Lampion, now fourteen years old, made an interesting announcement over the pumpkin pie. In her travels where none but she could go, after seven fascinating years of exploring a fraction of all the infinite worlds, she said she sensed beyond doubt that, as Barty's mother had told him on her deathbed, there is one special place beyond all the ways things are, one shining place..Then by ambulance to the hospital, whisked into surgery, and for a while, blessed unconsciousness.. "From childhood, I've had this ... awareness, this perception of an infinitely more complex reality than what my five basic senses reveal. A psychic claims to predict the future. I'm not a psychic. Whatever I am ... I'm able to feel a lot of the other possibilities inherent in any situation, to know they exist simultaneously with my reality, side by side, each world as real as mine. In my bones, in my blood-"..Having settled on the sofa with Agnes and Barty, prepared to serve comfortably in the role of quiet observer, Edom was alarmed to have suddenly become the subject of conversation. He was also alarmed to be called "son," because in his thirty-six years, the only person ever to have addressed him in that fashion had been his father, dead for a decade yet still a terror in Edom's dreams..Vanadium was surely unaware of any connection between Junior and Seraphim White. And now the girl could never talk..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."..Carrying the candlestick, he raced to the kitchen at the end of the short hall. The door stood open, but he had to enter the room to see Victoria slumped in one of the two chairs at the small dinette..Around the dinner table, the adults applauded, but the tougher audience squinted at the ceiling, toward which she believed the coin had arced, then at the table, where it ought to have fallen among the water glasses or in her creamed corn. At last she looked at Tom and said, "Not magic."..To the windows, then, drawing all the blinds securely down. And still, irrationally, she felt watched..On a street a half mile from the airport in Eugene, he sat in the parked Dodge long enough to gingerly unwind the bandages and use a tissue to wipe off the pungent but useless salve he'd purchased at a pharmacy. Although he pressed the Kleenex to his face so gently that the pressure might not have broken the surface tension on a pool of water, the agony of the touch was so great that he nearly passed out. The rearview mirror revealed clusters of hideous, large, red knobs with glistening yellow heads, and at the sight of himself, he actually did pass out for a minute or two, just long enough to dream that he was a grotesque but misunderstood creature being pursued through a stormy night by crowds of angry villagers with torches and pitchforks, but then the throbbing agony revived him..The girl sucked in deep lungsful of the weary clouds. "Better hold tight, Mommy, I'm gonna float."..Holding up his misshapen hands, knobby knuckles toward Agnes, Obadiah said, "How do you think they became like this?"..CLOUDS SWARMED THE late-afternoon sun, and the Oregon sky grew sapphire where still revealed. Cops gathered like bright-eyed crows in the lengthening shadow of the fire tower..At the foot of the bed: a cedar chest. Four feet long, two feet wide, perhaps three high. Brass handles..The shakes returned, became more violent than previously--and then once more passed..The muffling fog quieted the city as much as obscured it, and the alley was surprisingly still. Many of the businesses were closed for the night, and as far as Junior could discern, no delivery trucks or other vehicles were parked the length of the block..More likely than not, this was a lie, and the detective was, setting him up. Suddenly Junior wished that he had denied dreaming..Although she would have felt ridiculous phrasing this question in these words to any other three-year-old, no better way existed to ask it of her special son: "Kiddo ... do you realize you're speaking of your dad in the present tense?"..Kathleen hadn't noticed Tom replace his glass on the table, over the quarter. When he lifted it to drain the last of the martini, two dimes and a nickel glittered on the tablecloth, where previously the quarter had been..Nothing he could do about it now. Having Naomi's body moved to another grave, in a cemetery without Negroes, would cause a lot of talk. He didn't want to draw more attention to himself.. "Oh? Do they rent their house out to pirates with little pirate children, clowns with little clown children?"..Agnes winced. Already, another contraction. Mild but so soon after the last. She clasped her hands around her immense belly and took slow, deep breaths until the pain passed..She was not going to be as forthright with Barty as she had insisted that Joshua Nunn be with her, in part because she was too shaken to risk forthrightness.. "What do you think of the exhibition," Junior asked, taking one step toward the musician, crowding him.. "I see. Sometimes. Just quick. For like a blink. Like when you stand between two mirrors. You know?"..Ten months later, he finally wore her down. She accepted his proposal, and they set a date for the wedding..Edom had noticed them earlier. Now he saw they were in worse condition than he'd thought. Enlarged knuckles, fingers not entirely at natural angles to one another. Perhaps Obadiah had rheumatoid arthritis, like Bill Klefton, though a less crippling case..He might suspect, but he couldn't know. He would but would be left with at least a shred of doubt about Junior's..Her mother and father still resided in a world where Phimie was alive. Bringing them from that old reality to this new one would be the second-hardest thing Celestina had ever done..Junior was aware that all the cops were watching him as he stared down at the body, and he frantically tried to think what an innocent husband would be likely to do or say, but his imagination failed him. His thoughts could not be organized..Throughout Agnes's thirty-three years, strength had often been demanded of her, but never such strength as was required now to rein in her emotions and to be a rock for Barty. "Don't be scared, honey. I'm here." She took one of his small hands in both of hers. "I'll be waiting. You'll never be without me."..Happy weekend. His attitude amazed her, and his strength in the face of darkness gave her courage..Now came a slight but real risk of being heard inside: He pulled the trigger. The flat steel spring in the

lock-release gun caused the pick to jump upward, lodging some of the pins at the shear line. The snap of the hammer against the spring and the click of the pick against the pin tumblers were soft sounds, but anyone near the other side of the door would more likely than not hear them; if she was one room removed, however, the noise would not reach her. "Thursday it is," he said, clearly delighted to be receiving only a third of the fair-market rental from his apartment. In Losen's service was a man who called himself Hound, because, as he said, he had a nose for witchery. His employment was to sniff Losen's food and drink and garments and women, anything that might be used by enemy wizards against him; and also to inspect his warships. A ship is a fragile thing in a dangerous element, vulnerable to spells and hexes. As soon as Hound came aboard the new galley he scented something. "Well, well," he said, "who's this?" He walked to the helm and put his hand on it. "This is clever," he said. "But who is it? A newcomer, I think." He sniffed appreciatively. "Very clever," he said. The attorney's admission surprised Junior. This was probably as close as Magusson would ever get to saying, "Maybe you didn't kill your wife, after all, but he was by nature a nasty prick, so even an implied apology was more than Junior had ever expected to receive." Angel brightened at the sight of the coin turning end-over-end across his knuckles. "I could learn to do that," she asserted. "Now, I'm doubtless," Vanadium said, his voice returning to the uninflected drone that Junior had come to loathe but that he now preferred to the unsettling voice of quiet passion. "No matter what the situation, no matter how knotty the question, I always know what to do." Tom Vanadium checked the small wastebasket next to the sink and discovered a wad of bloody Kleenex. The crumpled wrappers from two Band-Aids. Agnes prepared a dinner to indulge him: hot dogs with cheese, potato chips. Root beer instead of milk. 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. Tom plucked the quarter off the glass, folded it into his right fist, and then at once opened his hand, which was now empty. Because of his blindness and his intellectual gifts, Barty was home schooled; besides, no teacher was a match for his autodidactic skills, nor could anyone possibly inspire in him a greater thirst for knowledge than the one with which he had been born. Angel went to this same informal classroom, and her sole fellow student was also her teacher. They aced the periodic equivalency tests that the law required. Their constant companionship seemed to be all play, yet was filled with constant learning, too. "And there's more," said Vinnie Lincoln, as round as Santa Claus and cherry-cheeked with pleasure at being able to bear these gifts. "The policy contained a double-indemnity clause in the event of death by accident. The complete tax-free payout is one and a half million." The nurse was in was gone, but Maria remained in attendance. She the vinyl-and-stainless-steel armchair, busy at. In the morning, after Agnes showered and dressed, when she went downstairs, she discovered Barty already at the kitchen table, eating a bowl of cereal while riveted to the book. Finished with breakfast, he returned to his room, reading as he went. If he hadn't been such a rational, stable, no-nonsense person all of his life, Junior might have thought he was losing his mind. Just as Celestina snapped shut the latches on the suitcase and turned to the door, a nurse's aide entered, pushing a cart loaded with towels and bed linens. When he reached the Suburban and closed his right hand around the handle on the driver's door, he felt something peculiar against his palm. A small, cold object balanced there. Of course, when turning a quarter across his knuckles, the cop had made no noise. And he had glided across the hospital room, in the dark, with feline stealth. After a little silence Otter said, "Thanks." And he looked up at Hound, one brief, questioning, judging glance. Six paces past that marker floorboard, Barty had the strangest feeling that someone was in the hallway with him. In spite of its dazzle, the detective's smile was nonetheless melancholy, proof that he was sincere when he said that Seraphim's baby was beyond their reach. Maria's face gathered into a frown, like a piece of brown cloth cinched by a series of whipstitches. "Six lessons." He spent the afternoon with her and stayed for dinner. He ate at her bedside, feeding both himself and her, balancing the progress of his meal with hers, so they finished together. He'd never fed her before, yet he wasn't awkward with her, or she with him, and later what he remembered of dinner was the conversation, not the logistics. Koko skidded to a halt, perplexed, looked left, looked right, floppy ears lifted slightly to catch any sound of Mistress Mary. Tom would have edged to his right, away from Edom, if Jacob hadn't flanked him. He remembered the odd comment that the more dour of the twins had made about the Bakersfield train wreck. On the way home, he repeatedly checked the rearview mirror. No vehicle followed him. Her awful sense of weightlessness became something much better: buoyancy, an exhilarating lightness of spirit. Fear remained with her--fear for Barty, fear of the future and of the strange complexity of Creation that she'd just glimpsed--but wonder and wild hope now tempered it. Paul pulled her back. He gently but firmly thrust her through the open door of the guest room in which he'd spent the night. "Stay here, wait." He was able to search five pages at a sitting before his head began to ache. He'd been putting in two sessions each day, starting this past Tuesday. Four thousand names a day. Sixteen thousand total when he finished the fifth of this evening's pages. No sign of Vanadium. Some of the taller monuments offered hiding places on both sides of the cemetery road, as did the thicker trunks of the larger trees. "If he gets back within the next hour, better ring me at his place so I can scoot." 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. Junior had thought most other policemen must consider Vanadium to be a loose cannon, a rogue, an outcast. Perhaps the opposite was true--and if it was, if Vanadium was highly regarded among his peers, he was immeasurably more dangerous than Junior had realized. Astonished and appalled by the cop's insensitivity, Junior said, "You just drop this on me? I lost my wife and my baby. My wife and my baby." Of the things you couldn't have seen coming, I'm the worst ... I'm the worst ... I'm the worst..... At the next comer, instead of continuing south, Junior angled aggressively in front of oncoming pedestrians, stepped off the curb, and

headed east, traversing the intersection against the advice of a Don't Walk sign. Horns blared, a city bus nearly flattened him, but he made. Of course, you've never seen anything like it, you worthless adolescent twit. You're not old enough to have seen squat, and even if you were older than your own grandfather, you wouldn't have seen anything like this, Dr Kildare, because this here is a true case of voodoo Baptist boils, and they don't come along often!. Fortifying herself with more coffee, Jolene said, "Edom, you were going to tell us how Joey's coping with fatherhood." Paul's Mediterranean complexion didn't make a blush easy to detect, but Tom thought his face brightened until it was a shade or two closer to the color of his rust-red hair. His eyes, usually so direct, evaded Celestina..No. Ridiculous. Naomi wasn't slumped across him. He wasn't sharing his bed with a corpse. That was E.C. Comics stuff, something from a yellowed issue of Tales from the Crypt..Junior levered up, scrambled up, vaulted over, and crashed into the deep bin, with every intention of landing on his feet. But he overshot, slammed his shoulder into the back wall of the container, fell to his knees, and sprawled facedown in the trash..The social worker's office once more. Rain tapping lightly at the window where Dr. Lipscomb had stared intently into the fog as he tried to avoid confronting the life-changing revelation that Phimie, speaking with the special knowledge of the once-dead, had shown him..Instead, she saw Phimie reborn. She saw, as well, a child endangered. Somewhere out there was a rapist capable of extreme cruelty and violence, a man who would--if Phimie was correct--react unpredictably if ever he learned of his.A speeding truck passed, stirring the fog, and the white broth churned past the car windows, a disorienting swirl..In spite of his dumpy appearance-and especially in the dark, where appearances didn't count-Vanadium had the aura of a mystic. Although Junior didn't believe in mystics or in the various unearthly powers they claimed to possess, he knew that mystics who believed in themselves were exceptionally dangerous people..As she struggled to cope with her loss, the last thing Agnes needed was the reminder posed by that empty chair. Maria's intentions were good, however, and Agnes didn't want to hurt her feelings..She curled up in the armchair, watching Barty. She was greedy for the sight of him. She thought she would not doze off, but would spend the night watching over him, yet exhaustion defeated her..A cause now apparent, the fear explained, Agnes held her baby more tightly. So new to the world, he seemed already to be slipping away from her, captured by the whirlpool of a demanding destiny..The mummified moon had unwound itself from its rags of embalming clouds. Its pocked face glowered in full brightness on the spreading branches of the pine, on the yard, and on the graveled driveway..Maria Gonzalez brought rice casseroles, homemade tamales, and chile rellenos. Daily, Jacob made cookies and brownies, always a new variety, and in such volume that Maria's plates were heaped with baked goods each time they were returned to her..In the kitchen, Barty sat at the table, and Paul's heart pinched at the sight of the boy in padded eyepatches.."See this?" He placed the pepper shaker in front of her on the room-service table and held the salt shaker concealed in his hand..Agnes's contractions were getting more frequent and slightly more severe, so she said, "All right, but let me go tell Edom and Jacob that we're leaving." Thick fog distorted all sense of time and place. At each end of the block, pearly hazes of light marked intersections with main streets but didn't illuminate this narrower passage in between. A few security lamps-bare bulbs under inverted-saucer shades or caged in wire--indicated the delivery entrances of some businesses, but the dense white shrouds veiled and diffused these, as well, until they were no brighter than gaslights..During the girl's final appointment, Junior discovered she would be home alone that same night, her parents at a function she wasn't required to attend. She appeared to reveal this inadvertently, quite innocently; however, Junior was a bloodhound when it came to smelling seduction, regardless of how subtle the scent..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.."But you wouldn't be willing to use that skill in the King's service?"

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