

THE RIGHT KNOCK

Caring for her, in every sense of that word, had made him a far happier man than he would otherwise have been—and a far better one. Whether or not the visitor in the client's chair had ever known much romance, he unquestionably had experienced too much adventure and more than his share of tragedy. Thomas Vanadium's face was a quake-rocked landscape: cracked by white scars like fault lines in a strata of granite; the planes of brow, cheeks, and jaws canted in odd relationships to one another. The hemangioma that surrounded his right eye and discolored his face had been with him since birth, but the awful damage to his bone structure was the work of man, not God. After the amusement park, no hospital for the Pie Lady. With Wally near, she had a doctor all her own, capable of giving her the anticancer drugs and transfusions that she required. While radiation therapy is prescribed for acute lymphoblastic leukemia, it is much less useful to treat myeloblastic cases, and in this instance, it wasn't deemed helpful, which made treatment at home even easier. On Tuesday evening, September 7, after half an hour in the lotus position, thinking about nothing whatsoever but a white pin with two black bands at its neck and the number I painted on its head, Junior went to bed at eleven o'clock and set his alarm for three in the morning, when he intended to shoot himself. Besides, he wasn't on the Greenbaum Gallery customer list and didn't have an invitation. 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. Celestina stared curiously at Tom Vanadium. She had witnessed the effect of vanishment, though she hadn't actually seen the coin disappear in midair. Yet she seemed to sense either that something more than sleight of hand had just transpired or that the trick had a meaning she'd missed. "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." Dressed entirely in a shade of pink that darkened to rouge when wet, Angel squealed and deserted Barty. Spotted-streaked-splashed, with false tears on her cheeks, with a darkly glimmering crown of rain jewels in her hair, she raced up the steps as though she were a princess abandoned by her coachman, and allowed herself to be scooped into her grandmother's arms. From the phone, Barty proceeded directly to the refrigerator. He opened the door, got a can of orange soda, and returned without hesitation to his chair at the table. "Please try not to be alarmed, Miss White, but I have a patrol car on the way to your address." Among themselves, the authorities spoke more often than not in murmurs. Or perhaps Junior was too distracted to hear them clearly. He opened the solid doors on the bottom of the breakfront, did not find what he was looking for, checked in the sideboard next, and there it was, a small liquor supply. Scotch, gin, vodka. He selected a full bottle of vodka. The modulated electronic brrrrr was similar to the sound of the telephone in Vanadium's cramped study, on Sunday night. Junior was transported back to that place, that moment in time. He couldn't easily refuse the assignment. Later that year, President Lyndon Johnson, with strong backing from both the Democratic and the Republican Parties, was expected to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and currently it was dangerous for clearheaded believers in the primacy of self to express their healthy instincts, which might be mistakenly perceived as racial prejudice. He could be fired. These weren't lakes of blood, just smears, so Junior could wipe them up quickly, once he got the corpse out of the hallway, but the sight of them further infuriated him. He was here to bring closure to all the unfinished business of Spruce Hills, to free himself from vengeful spirits, to better his life and plunge henceforth entirely into a bright new future. He wasn't here, damn it, to do building maintenance. Abruptly, Junior Cain turned away from the tower, from the body of his lost love, dropped to his knees, and vomited. Vomited more explosively than he had ever done in the depths of the worst sickness of his life. Bitter, thick, grossly out of proportion to the simple lunch that he had eaten, up came a dreadfully reeking vomitus. He was untroubled by nausea, but his abdominal muscles contracted painfully, so tightly that he thought he would be cinched in two, and up came more, and still more, spasm after spasm, until he spewed a thin gruel green with bile, which surely had to be the last of it, but was not, for here was more bile, so acidic that his gums burned from contact with it—Oh God, please no—still more. His entire body heaving. Choking as he aspirated a piece of something vile. He squeezed his watering eyes shut against the sight of the flood, but he could not block out the stench. Neighbors might not be home. And by the time he knocked, asked to use the phone, dialed ... Too great a waste of time. His apartment, over the large garage, was reached by a set of exterior stairs. The space was divided into two rooms. The first was a combination living room and kitchenette, with a corner dining table seating two. Beyond was a small bedroom with adjoining bath. After a surgeon had lanced fifty-four boils and cut the cores from the thirty-one most intractable (shaving the patient's head to get at the twelve that were festering on his scalp), and after three days of hospitalization to guard against staphylococcus infection, and after he had been turned back into the world as bald as Daddy Warbucks and with the promise of permanent scarring, Junior visited the Reno library to catch up with current events. "Blood tests should reveal whether the child's yours or not. That also might explain all this." "A nose, now, is a useful thing, a salable thing," Hound went on. "Not that I'm looking for competition. But a finder can always find work, as they say... You ever been in a mine?" 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. In the kitchen, he sat her in a chair and let her slump forward over the breakfast table. With her arms folded, with her head on her arms and turned to one side, she appeared to be resting. Because this kind of fictional fact, like maps of imaginary realms, is of real interest to some readers, I include the description after the stories. I also redrew the geographical maps for this book, and while doing so, happily discovered a very old one in the Archives in Havnor. Sparky wasn't a bad guy, not easily bought, and if he'd been asked

to sell out any tenant other than Cain, he probably wouldn't have done so at any price. He greatly disliked Cain, however, and considered him to be "as strange and creepy as a syphilitic monkey." One problem: Nolly Wulfstan, Quasimodo without a hump, probably repaired to this convenient club after work, to down a few beers, because this was surely as close as he would ever get to a halfway attractive woman. The detective would think that he and Junior were here for the same reason—to gawk at nearly naked babes and store up enough images of bobbling breasts to get through the night—and he would not be able to comprehend that for Junior the attraction was the dance, the intellectual thrill of experiencing a new cultural phenomenon. Her father respected and admired Tom, so she was thankful for his presence. And anyone who could survive whatever catastrophe had left him with this cubistic face was a man she wanted on her team in a crisis. While Junior had been hospitalized, Vanadium had searched his lace, with or without a warrant. Turnabout was satisfying. In his mind's eye, Junior saw the coin in transit of the blunt fingers, moving more swiftly than previously because its passage was lubricated by blood. "I'm no hero," Paul insisted. "I just got your mom out of there in the process of saving myself." "Cancer," she whispered, and superstitiously reproached herself for speaking the word aloud, as though thereby she'd given power to the malignancy and ensured its existence. Stepping forward lightly, lightly, as he swung the candlestick, Junior saw the dinner guest stiffen, perhaps sensing danger or at least movement, but it was too late. The guy didn't even have time to turn his head or duck. When she discovered she was pregnant, Phimie dealt with this new trauma as other naive fifteen-year-olds had done before her: She sought to avoid the scorn and the reproach that she imagined would be heaped upon her for having failed to reveal the rape at the time it occurred. With no serious thought to long-term consequences, focused solely on the looming moment, in a state of denial, she made plans to conceal her condition as long as possible. "Love you," Wally said, and Celestina repeated it, and he said, "I'm gonna stand in the hall till I hear you set both locks." "Oh, yes. When he phoned, Reverend Collins told me all about you and Bartholomew. At the front door, when I asked the boy's name, I already knew it and was just setting up this little trick for you." Junior thought he was alone, but just when he felt capable of summoning the energy to shift to a more comfortable position, he heard a man clear his throat. The phlegmy sound had come from beyond the door. DOWN SHE WENT, abruptly and hard, with a clatter and thud, her natural grace deserting her in the fall, though she regained it in her posture of collapse. "Water can break?" Maria asked, looking toward the faucet at the kitchen sink. She sighed. "I have so much to be learned." Junior shuddered. Vanadium hadn't invented the name. It had genuine if inexplicable resonance with Junior that had nothing to do with the detective. "He knew how you felt about having too much life insurance. So he didn't disclose it to you." The sudden change of subject, from the airliner crash to Phimie, confused Celestina. The paramedic, fingers pressed to the radial artery in Junior's right wrist, must have felt a rocket-quick acceleration in his pulse rate. Tom Vanadium's uninflected but curiously hypnotic voice, his pensive manner, his gray eyes so beautiful in that fractured face, his air of measured melancholy, and his evident intelligence gave him a presence that was simultaneously as solid as a great mass of granite and yet otherworldly. Using this apartment as a base, Nolly and Kathleen had conducted some of the small skirmishes in the first phase of the war, including the ghost serenades. They left the place tidy. Indeed, the only sign that they had ever been here was a packet of dental floss left behind on the sill of a living-room window. By Thursday, the eruption passed from him. Because he'd had the self-control not to claw his face or hands, he was presentable enough to venture out into the city; although if people in the streets could have seen the weeping scabs and inflamed scratches that tattooed his body and limbs, they would have fled with the grim certainty that the black. Raise high the candlestick. In spite of the masking music, breathe shallowly and through the mouth. Remain poised, ready. At her touch, she felt a tension go out of the doctor. His hands slipped from his face, and he turned to her, shuddering not with fear but with what might have been relief. Trying to ignore his phantom toe, which itched furiously, he searched the apartment. He proceeded carefully, determined not to shoot himself in the foot accidentally this time. Because he kept imagining the stealthy sounds of a dead cop rising in vengeance behind him, Junior switched on the radio. He tuned in a station featuring a Top 40 countdown. Alone with Paul, as he stood abashed, she removed her blouse and bra and, with arms crossed over her breasts, revealed to him her savaged back. Whereas her father had used open-hand slaps and hard fists to teach his twin sons the lessons of God, he preferred canes and lashes as the instruments of education for his daughter, because he believed that his direct touch might have invited sin. Scars disfigured Agnes from shoulders to buttocks, pale scars and others dark, crosshatched and whorled. "Sit down, sit down," Agnes urged. "I can offer coffee now and pie in a little bit." A mutual interest in ballroom dancing had resulted in their introduction when each needed a new partner for a fox-trot and swing competition. Nolly had started taking lessons five years before he had met Kathleen. Out of respect for his mother, Barty struggled to hold fast to his eyeless second sight, living in the idea of a world where he still had vision, until she had been accorded the honors she deserved and had been laid to rest beside his father. Junior was paying his dinner check and calculating the tip when the pianist launched into "Someone to Watch over Me." Although he'd expected it all evening, he twitched when he recognized the tune. "If you ranted at him about earthquakes, tornadoes, erupting volcanoes, and all that stuff, how could he mistake you for me?" "You're better at concentrative meditation without seed than anyone I've ever known, better than me. That's why you, especially, should never undertake a long session unsupervised," Chicane scolded. "At the very least, the very least, you should use your electronic meditation timer. I don't see it here, do I?" Instead of opening his left fist, Tom lifted his martini with his right, and on the tablecloth under the glass lay the coin. Frequently, people told Agnes that she should find an agent for Barty, as he was wonderfully photogenic; modeling and acting careers, they assured her, were his for the asking. Though her son was indeed a fine-looking lad, Agnes knew he wasn't as exceptionally handsome as many perceived him to be. Rather than his looks, what made Barty so appealing, what made him seem extraordinarily good-looking, were other qualities:

an unusual gracefulness for a child, such a physical easiness in every movement and posture that it seemed as though some curious personal relationship with time had allowed him twenty years to become a three-year-old; an unfailingly affable temperament and quick smile that possessed his entire face, including his mesmerizing green blue eyes. Perhaps most affecting of all, his remarkable good health was expressed in the lustrous sheen of his thick hair, in the golden-pink glow of his summer-touched skin, in every physical aspect of him, until there were times when he seemed radiant. He vanished through some hole, some slit, some tear bigger than anything through which Tom flipped his quarters. The Bones of the Earth. When she tried to speak to him, she could no more easily raise her voice than she could extend a hand to him. 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. "He's here as sure as I am, Barty. He's very busy, with a whole universe to run, so many people to look after, not just here but on other planets, like you've been reading about." To become a physical therapist, Junior had taken more than massage classes, so he knew what hematemeses meant. Hematemesis: vomiting of blood. The January air was crisp, fragrant with evergreens and with the faint salty scent of the distant sea. A curiously yellow moon glowered like a malevolent eye, studying him from between ragged ravelings of dirty clouds. All windows opening onto the fire escape featured a laminated sandwich of glass and steel-wire mesh to prevent easy access by burglars. Tom Vanadium knew all the tricks of the best B-and-E artists, but he didn't need to break in order to enter here. The two men detached and rolled up the pleated green skirt that hung from the rectangular frame of the graveyard winch on which the casket was suspended. Green, rather than black, because Naomi loved nature: Junior had been thoughtful about the details of the service. 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. Clenching his right hand around the quarter, waving left hand over right, he intoned, "Jingle-jangle, mingle-jingle." Opening his right hand, he revealed that the coin had vanished. Indeed, as Celestina and the kid reached the foot of the steps to this second house, Bartholomew pointed, and the woman turned to look back. She appeared to stare straight at the Mercedes, though the fog made it impossible for Junior to be sure. The guy appeared vulnerable, his arms occupied with the kid and the bag, and Junior considered bursting out of the Mercedes, striding straight to the Celestina-humping son of a bitch, and shooting him point-blank in the face. Brain-shot, he would drop quicker than if the headless horseman had gotten him with an ax, and the kid would go down with him, and Junior would shoot the bastard boy next, shoot him in the head three times, four times just to be sure. In her features, the girl entirely resembled her mother. She was nothing whatsoever like Junior. Only the light brown shade of her skin provided evidence that she hadn't been derived from Seraphim by parthenogenesis. The paramedic pulled shut the door, leaving Joey outside in the night, in the storm, in the wind between worlds. When the ophthalmologist saw her misery, his kind face softened further, and his pity became palpable. Even though the detective was on the wrong track, Junior was beginning to feel aggrieved. As any good citizen, he was willing, even eager to cooperate with responsible policemen who conducted their investigation by the book. This Thomas Vanadium, however, in spite of his monotonous voice and drab appearance, gave off the vibes of a fanatic. Commodified fantasy takes no risks: it invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth-telling to sentimental platitude. Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits. Profoundly disturbing moral choices are sanitized, made cute, made safe. The passionately conceived ideas of the great story-tellers are copied, stereotyped, reduced to toys, molded in bright-colored plastic, advertised, sold, broken, junked, replaceable, interchangeable. Obadiah tossed the pack of cards to Edom, startling him. "Son, you'll have to help me. My fingers have no finesse anymore." The poster announced an upcoming show, titled "This Momentous Day," by the young artist calling herself Celestina White. Dates for the exhibition were Friday, January 12, through Saturday, January 27. For a while he enjoyed being challenged to figure the number of seconds elapsed since a particular historical event. Given the date, he did the calculations in his head, providing a correct answer in as little as twenty seconds, rarely taking more than a minute. Agnes's chilled bones. Pushing a tangle of wet hair away from her face, she realized that her hands were shaking. At first all had gone well. Agnes, Maria, and Edom were rightly amazed. A thrill of wonder and big smiles all around the table. They were enthralled by the astoundingly favorable fall of cards, a breathtaking mathematical improbability. 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. "What's below us?" Hound pointed to the floor, paved with rough slate flags. Perhaps his sister intuited what Edom was about to say, because she didn't let him get started. Hound had taken him, had stood and seen his people beaten senseless, had not stopped the beating. Yet he spoke as a friend. Why? said Otter's look. Hound answered it. Although he had made no effort to summon them, tears spilled from Junior's closed eyes. They weren't drawn from him by thoughts of poor Naomi. These next few days—perhaps weeks—were going to be tedious, until he could have Nurse Victoria Bressler. Under the circumstances, he had good reason to feel sorry for himself. By this time, Vinton had finished, commercials had run, and the number-two song had started: "Come See About Me," by the Supremes. She switched off the hall light and stood at the half-open door, listening, waiting. The only bad moment in the evening came when the pianist played "Someone to Watch over Me." Celestina had a delayed reaction to Barty's name. An odd look came over her. "Barty? Short for ... Bartholomew?" She figured that she could stay home, devoting herself to Barty, for perhaps three years before she would be wise to find work. AT ST. MARY'S HOSPITAL,

where Wally had brought Angel into this world three years ago, he was now fighting for his life, for a chance to see the girl grow and to be the father she needed. He'd been taken to surgery already when Celestina and Angel arrived a few minutes behind the ambulance..When Victoria finally calmed her racing heart, she returned the spoon to the tray on the nightstand, stoppered the carafe, and said, "That's enough for now, Mr. Cain. In your condition, even too much I melted ice might trigger renewed vomiting." 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..Junior was pleasantly surprised by his flexibility and by his audacity. He was, indeed, a new man, a daring adventurer, and by the day he grew more formidable..The slow-motion death ballet, in which Bonnie and Clyde were riddled with bullets, was the worst moment Junior had ever heard in a film. He didn't see more than a brief glimpse of it, because he sat with his eyes squeezed shut. Nine days previously, at Google's instructions, Junior had rented boxes at two mail-receiving services, using the name John Pinchbeck at one, Richard Gammoner at the other, and then he had supplied those addresses to the papermaker. These were the two identities for which Google ultimately provided elaborate and convincing documentation..Throughout this procedure, Barty appeared solemn and thoughtful. When he had squeezed the tenth toe, he stared at it, brow furrowed..The shriek of the sirens groaned into silence. The police must have pulled to the curb in the street.."I hope it was all right I let him in, Mr. Cain." Sparky had a capuchin's overbite, too. "He told me it was an emergency." In his right hand again, the real gun, loaded with ten hollow-point rounds, felt charged with supernatural power: to Bartholomew as a crucifix to Dracula, as holy water to a demon, as kryptonite to Superman..Agnes remembered the blood, the awful red flood. Excruciating pain and such fearsome crimson torrents. She'd thought her baby had entered the world stillborn on a tide of its own blood and hers..Three times, the singing faded away, but twice, just when he thought that she had finished, she began to croon again. The third time, the silence lasted..For a spirit, the maniac lawman appeared disturbingly solid. He wore a tweed sports jacket and slacks that, as far as Junior could tell, were the same clothes he'd worn on the night he died. Apparently, even the ghosts of Sklent's atheistic spiritual world were stuck for eternity in the clothes in which they had perished..The striking resemblance between this artist and Seraphim, as well as the facts in the biographical sketch under the photo, argued that the two were sisters..Even Rudy, as huge as Big Foot and as amoral as a skink, was afraid of this woman..Leaving the children under the tree, Tom returned to the house to phone the police..Angel, as if in God's own hands, stared with round-eyed wonder at the physician..The blessing of Nellie's silence lasted only until Hanna, cursed with speech if not with sufficient strength to stand, said, "We tried to reach you, Mr. Damascus, but you'd already left the pharmacy." Furrowing her brow and narrowing her eyes as though prepared to scold him, she slowly lowered her face to his, until their noses were touching, and she whispered, "Because it's more fun if it's secret." A table candle glowed in an amber glass. To Nolly, in this glimmering light, Kathleen's face was more radiant than the flame..The blue vault above, cloudless now, was the most threatening sky that Edom had ever seen. The air was astonishingly dry so soon after a storm. And still. Hushed. Earthquake weather. Before this momentous day was done, great temblors and five-hundred-foot tidal waves would rock and swamp the coast..When he was baking, the world seemed to be a less dangerous place. Sometimes, making a cake, he forgot to be afraid..He did not answer Hound's question.."Sometimes it's sad here, Mommy. But it's not sad every place you are. Lots of places, Daddy's with you and me, and we're happier, and everything's okay." As best he could, he examined his clothes. They were better pressed than he expected, and not noticeably soiled..She whispered then: "You are my little lampion, Barty. You light the way for me." Mocked by the silvery ping-ting-jingle of the maniac detective emptying his ghostly pockets, Junior ran..Clutching the red rose in his left hand, the brightly wrapped gift box half crushed in his right, Thomas Vanadium lay at Junior's mercy, with no tricks to perform, no quarter to set dancing across his knuckles., interminably against the ignition plate before, at last, he was able to insert it. "Should be a boy, because then you'll always have a man around the house." "I'm Sister Josephina." She slipped Celestina's purse off her shoulder--"You can trust this with me"--Worse, the people who adopted Seraphim's baby might be anywhere in the nine-county Bay Area. Millions of phone listings to scan..Celestina dropped to one knee in front of Angel, to tie the drawstrings of the hood under the girl's chin..Dining room. Two place settings at one end of the table. Wineglasses. Two ornate pewter candlesticks, candies not yet lit.."Why? What was he going to get out of it?" He felt so happy, he was improving every day in every way, life just got better-but then something happened that was worse than the shooting. It ruined his day, his week, the rest of his year..The slur faded from his voice in minutes, but he suspected that straining too long to sustain this borrowed vision could result in a stroke or worse.."Is it as bad as that?" Celestina wondered plaintively, though she knew the answer. "I love San Francisco. The city inspires my work. I've built a life here. Is it really as bad as that?" At the head of the line, Paul waved a red handkerchief out of the window of the station wagon..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..FOR JUNIOR CAIN, the Year of the Horse (1966) and the Year of the Sheep (1967) offered many opportunities for personal growth and self-improvement. Even if by Christmas Eve, '67, Junior would not be able to take a dry walk in the rain, this nevertheless was a period of great achievement and much pleasure for him..Twice would indicate a dangerous mania. Three times would be indefensible. But once was healthy experimentation. A learning experience..Again, he cast his line of memory into murky waters nearly four years in the past, to the night of passion that he had shared with Seraphim in the parsonage. As before, he could recall nothing she'd said, only the exquisite look of her, the nubile perfection of her body..do further testing, of course, but not until he's been stabilized at least twelve hours. Personally, I don't think we'll find any physical cause. Most likely, this was psychological-acute nervous emesis, caused by severe anxiety, the shock of losing his wife, seeing her

die.' Hesitantly, the ivory tickler shook hands. "I'm ... uh ... I'm Ned Gnathic. Everyone calls me Neddy." Although he considered tearing up the letter and throwing it away he knew that his perceptions were clouded by grief and that what he'd written might seem fine if he reviewed it in a less dark state of mind. He returned the letter to the envelope and put it in the drawer of his nightstand..An SFPD patrol car swept past, its siren silent, the rack of emergency beacons flashing on its roof..Up flew his hands, as white as doves, flapping as though trying to escape from the sleeves of his raincoat, as if he were a magician rather than a musician.."Yeah," he confirmed, applying a blue crayon to a grinning bunny that was dancing with a squirrel.."Fifty died in London, in '57, when two trains crashed. And a hundred twelve were crushed, torn, mangled, in '52, also England." "That discord sets up lots of other vibrations, some of which will return to you in ways you might expect-and some in ways you could never see coming. Of the things you couldn't have seen coming, I'm the worst." Suitcases seemed to be missing. Some clothes, as well. Could mean a weekend vacation..Among those present before the caravan returned were a few who should have known better than to allow this madness. Tom Vanadium, Edom, Maria. They stared up at the boy, tense and solemn, and Agnes could only suppose that they, too, had arrived after the fact, with the boy already beyond easy recall..were a favorite pair when he was puttering around the house on weekends. "Oh," he said, "that dog."

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