

## COBBLESTONES OF HOPE

"She's got preeclampsia. It's a condition that occurs in about five percent of pregnancies, virtually always after the twenty-fourth week, and usually it can be treated successfully. But I'm not going to sugarcoat this, Celestina. In her case, it's more serious. She hasn't been seeing a doctor, no prenatal care, and here she is in the middle of her thirtyeighth week, about ten days from delivery." Frustrated again, she said simply, "Whenever Edom and Jacob talk about these things, I want you to be sure always to keep in mind that life's about living and being happy, not about dying." Always, he was good with Barty, and on this occasion, he teased more than the usual number of smiles and giggles from the boy as he tried to get him to read the Snellen chart on the wall. Then he lowered the lights in the examination room to study his eyes with an ophthalmometer and an ophthalmoscope. No one was surprised by his proposal, her acceptance, and the wedding. Barty and Angel were both eighteen when they were married in June of 1983. 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." "Thirsty," Agnes rasped. Her voice was Sahara sand abrading ancient stone, the dry whisper of a pharaoh's mummy talking to itself in a vaulted sealed for three thousand years. Considering Junior's actions on his last night in Spruce Hills, eleven months ago, he must be cautious now. Without incriminating himself, pretending ignorance, he hoped to learn if his carefully planned scenario, regarding Victoria's death and Vanadium's sudden disappearance, had convinced the authorities—or whether something had gone wrong that might explain the quarter at the diner. Furious, he squeezed off two shots. Passing the living-room archway, Tom saw Jacob in the armchair, under the reading lamp, slumped as if asleep over the book. His crimson bib confirmed that he wasn't just sleeping. 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. The window gave way an instant before Celestina squeezed off the shot. The man dropped out of sight. She didn't know if she had scored a hit. Copyright (c) 2001 by Ursula K. Le Guin All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. Barty, she explained, would be rich in many ways. Financially rich, but also rich in talent, in spirit, intellect. Rich in courage, honor. With a wealth of common sense, good judgment, and luck. "Then you have a big advantage, and you'll have to tell us all about yourselves," Agnes said. "I'll get the coffee brewing ... unless you'd like to help." The shriek of the sirens groaned into silence. The police must have pulled to the curb in the street. Junior knelt beside her and pressed two fingers to the carotid artery in her neck. She had a pulse, maybe a little irregular but strong. "You must be thinking of someone else," she said, pushing a wad of bills into his hand. "Me, I'm a jellyfish in high heels." The two men introduced themselves. The physician was Dr. Jim Parkhurst. His manner was easy and affable, and his soothing voice, either by nature or by calculation, was as healing as balm. The deejay announced song number four for the week: the Beatles' "She's a Woman." The Fab Four filled the Studebaker with music. 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." The morning that it happened, Tom Vanadium rose later than usual, shaved, showered, and then used the telephone in Paul's downstairs study to call Max Bellini in San Francisco and to speak, as well, with authorities in both the Oregon State Police and the Spruce Hills Police Department. At last Maria answered Jacob's question in a murmur, making the f sign of the cross once more as she spoke. "Never saw four. Never even just I see three. But four ... is to be the devil himself." The night was hushed but for the barking of a dog in the great distance. Hollow, far softer than the ghostly singing that had recently haunted Junior, the rough voice of this hound nevertheless stirred him, spoke to an essential aspect of his heart. Saturday morning, Paul made himself useful by assisting Grace with food preparation and by setting out the plates, flatware, and glasses on the dining-room sideboard. At last: the humiliating backless gown, the precious drugs, even a pretty nurse who seemed to like him, and then oblivion. He had assumed that the dinner guest was Victoria's lover, but suddenly he realized that this might not be the case. The man might be nothing more than a friend. Her father or a brother. In which case the invitation to romance—posed by the coquettishly arranged wine and rose—would be so wildly inappropriate that the visitor would know at. When he killed the Bartholomew, this haunting would finally end, too. In Junior's mind, Vanadium and Bartholomew were inextricably linked, because it was the maniac cop who first heard Junior calling out Bartholomew in his sleep. Did that make sense? Well, it made more sense at some times than at others, but it always made a lot more sense than anything else. To be rid of the dead-but-persistent detective, he must eliminate Bartholomew. slow breaths, and then she pointed at the windshield. "The hospital's that way." "I was hoping you might know," said Edom, studying the collar of Jacob's green flannel shirt. Edom felt uneasy in this kingdom of a strange god. The god that his brother feared was humanity, its dark compulsions, its arrogance. Edom, on the other hand, trembled before Nature, whose wrath was so great that one day she would destroy all things, when the universe collapsed into a super dense nugget of matter the size of a pea. According to the newspapers, the police also credited him with the murders of Naomi, Victoria Bressler, and Ned Gnathic (whom they had connected to Celestina). He was wanted, too, for the attempted murder of Dr. Walter Lipscomb (evidently Ichabod), for the attempted murder of Grace White, and for assault with intent to kill Celestina White and her daughter, Angel, and for the assault on Lenora Kickmule (whose foxtail-bedecked Pontiac he had stolen in Eugene, Oregon). Less cautious than the typical accountant, perhaps mellow in this season of peace, Prosser opened the door without hesitation. "More than

remorse," the magician said. "Shame. I come from good people. I wasn't raised to be a cheat. Sometimes, trying to figure how I went wrong, I think it wasn't the need for money that ruined me. At least not that alone, not even that primarily. It was pride in my skill with the cards, frustrated pride because I wasn't getting enough nightclub work to show off as much as I wanted to." He had the capacity to be exceptional at anything to which he applied himself. Bob Chicane had been right about that: Junior was far more intense than other men, possessed of greater gifts and the energy to use them. He remembered standing in the cemetery, downhill from Seraphim's grave-although at the time he'd known only that it was a Negro being buried, not that it was his former lover-and thinking that the rains would over time carry the juices of the decomposing Negro corpse into the lower grave that contained Naomi's remains. Had that been a half-psyhic moment on his part, a dim awareness that another and far more dangerous connection between dead Naomi and dead Seraphim had already been formed? For guidance, Agnes couldn't rely entirely on any of the child rearing books in her library. Barty's unique gifts presented her with special parenting problems. Now, when he asked if he could stay up even later, to read about John Thomas Stuart and Lummo, John's pet from another world, she granted him permission. Her elegance was appealing. A pink Chanel suit with knee-length skirt, a strand of pearls. Her figure was spectacular, but she didn't flaunt it. She was even wearing a bra. In this age of bold erotic fashion, her more demure style was enormously seductive. Applying enough pain, he could have gotten cooperation even from Vanadium. The detective had said he'd heard Junior fearfully repeat Bartholomew in his sleep, which Junior believed to be true, because the name did resonate with him; however, he wasn't sure he believed the cop's claim to be ignorant of the identity of this nemesis. Most likely, Reverend White's ramblings were as greasy with sentiment and oily with irrational optimism as were his daughter's paintings, so Junior was in no hurry to learn the name of the radio program or to write for a transcript of the sermon. In his room, he settled on the bed with his constipating snacks and the county telephone book. Because he had packed the directory with the Zedd collection, the thief hadn't gotten it. After a bit Otter nodded left, away from the grey stone tower. They walked on towards a long, treeless valley, past grass-grown dumps and tailings. Lifting his martini, theatrically gesturing to the tablecloth where the glass had stood, as though the lack of coins proved that he, too, had sorcerous power, Nolly said, "Another round of this magical concoction?". The word need, instead of want, moved Paul to follow the doctor across the coffee shop. Junior realized that thick drool oozed out of the right corner of his mouth. Shakily, he raised one hand to wipe his face. The Bright Beach Library was open until nine on Friday evening. Arriving an hour before closing, they returned the Heinlein novels that Barty had already read and checked out the three that he wanted. In a spirit of optimism, they borrowed a fourth, Podkayne of Mars. Junior was at critical depth. The psychological pressure was at least five thousand pounds per square inch and growing by the second. Implosion imminent. "Naomi--she popped out of my oven twenty years ago, not out of yours," Sheena continued in a fierce whisper. "If anyone's suffering here, it's me, not you. Who're you, anyway? Some guy who's been boinking her for a couple years, that's all you are. I'm her mother. You can never know my pain. And if you don't stand with this family to make these wankers pay up big-time, I'll personally cut your balls off while you're sleeping and feed them to my cat." Because the upper part of the hospital bed was somewhat raised, he didn't have to lift his head from the pillow to study the corner where the phantom waited. He peered beyond the IV rack, past the foot of the bed. No turning back. In the fuming blackness, they would become disoriented in seconds, fall, and suffocate as surely as they would burn. Besides, the open window, providing draft, would draw the fire rapidly down the hallway at their backs. After the song concluded, Junior felt better. His heartbeat soon returned to normal. The damp palms of his hands grew dry. He picked up Angel, picked up Barty. "Hold on." He carried them out of the room, down the stairs, out of the house, to the yard under the great tree, where they would wait for the police, and where they would not see Jacob's body when the coroner removed it by way of the front door. The paper towels were spotted with butter. He crumpled them and threw them in the trash. This didn't work for Junior. Strangely, when he focused on a mental image of any fruit-apple, peach, banana-his thoughts drifted to sex. He became aroused and had no hope of clearing his mind. Agnes hadn't asked him to keep his strange feat a secret from his uncles. In truth, she had come home in such a curious state of mind that even as she'd worked with Jacob to prepare dinner and even as she'd overseen Edom's setting of the table, she hesitated to tell them what had happened on the run from Joey's grave to the station wagon. She fluctuated between guarded euphoria and fear bordering on panic, and she didn't trust herself to recount the experience until she had taken more time to absorb it. Agnes, who inherited the property, would have welcomed her brothers in the main house. Although both were willing to visit her for an occasional dinner or to sit in rocking chairs on the porch, on a summer night, neither could abide living in that ominous place. "Oh? Do they rent their house out to pirates with little pirate children, clowns with little clown children?" Barty had awakened able to read. On the page, lines of type no longer twisted under his gaze. The Rolex. Because most of the trash in the huge bin was bagged, finding the watch would be easier than Junior had feared. Without ceremony or prayer, although with much righteous anger, Junior hoisted the dead musician over the lip of the Dumpster. For a dreadful moment, his left arm tangled in the loosely cinched belt of the London Fog raincoat. Straining a shrill bleat of anxiety through his clenched teeth, he desperately shook loose and let go of the body. He briefly closed his hand around the three coins, then with a snap of his wrist, flung them at Nolly, who flinched. But either the coins were never flung or they vanished in midair-and his hand was empty. "Three hundred and ninety-six of the dead were children under the age of ten," Jacob continued. "A passenger train was tumbled off the tracks, killing twenty. Another train with tank cars got smashed around, and oil spilled across the flood waters, ignited, and all these people clinging to floating debris were surrounded by flames, no way to escape. Their choice was being burned alive or drowning." The paramedic pulled shut the door, leaving Joey outside in the night, in the storm, in the wind between worlds. 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..Besides, he'd noticed a tendency among dopers to get maudlin, whereupon they sank into a confessional mood, seeking peace through rambling self-analysis and self-revelation. Junior was too private a person to behave in such a fashion. Furthermore, if drugs ever put him in a confessional mood, the consequence might be electrocution or poison gas, or lethal injection, depending on the jurisdiction and the year in which he fell into an unbosoming frame of mind..Angel followed him and observed as he climbed a stepstool and unhooked the telephone handset. He dialed with little pause between digits, and spoke with each of his uncles..Beautiful she was, both of face and form, even with her mouth gaping wide and her eyes rolled back in her skull. How bright her future might have been if she had not chosen to deceive. A tease was, in essence, a deceiver-promising what she never intended to deliver..With her brothers, she adjourned to the waiting room, where the three of them sat drinking vending-machine coffee, black, from paper cups..He groaned. "That just doesn't cut it, Mom. If I gotta be blind, I think I should get to say peed off."..Meanwhile, before they needed to plan the wedding, there was time for an orange soda and a root beer, and more of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde..Over the final refrain of "I'll Be Seeing You" came a man's voice from the foyer, raised quizzically, with perhaps a note of surprise: "Victoria..I'm wondering," Nolly said, "if you're not an officer of the law anymore, in what capacity are you going to pursue Cain?"..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..Cupping Angel entirely in his big hands, smiling at her, he said, "Oh, no, Mrs. White, this looks like a healthy young lady to me. No medicine required."..The Finder" takes place about three hundred years before the time of the novels, in a dark and troubled time; its story casts light on how some of the customs and institutions of the Archipelago came to be. "The Bones of the Earth" is about the wizards who taught the wizard who first taught Ged, and shows that it takes more than one mage to stop an earthquake. "Darkrose and Diamond" might take place at any time during the last couple of hundred years in Earthsea; after all, a love story can happen at any time, anywhere. "On the High Marsh" is a story from the brief but eventful six years that Ged was Archmage of Earthsea. And the last story, "Dragonfly," which takes place a few years after the end of Tehanu, is the bridge between that book and the next one, The Other Wind (to be published soon). A dragon bridge..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..He had not yet disposed of her personal effects. In the dark, he went to the dresser, opened a drawer, and found a cotton sweater that she had worn recently..Well, it still is to me. But what I've been wondering ... when you talk about all the ways things are ... is there someplace where you don't have this problem with your eyes?"..He still had a sour taste in his mouth, although it was not as disgusting as it had been. All the odors were wonderfully clean and bracing--antiseptics, floor wax, freshly laundered bedsheets-without a whiff of..Agnes meant to stop Maria from turning the eleventh card, but her curiosity was equal to her apprehension..The glimmering bay and the shimmering amber candlelight provided the perfect atmosphere for the song that arose now from the piano in the bar..Junior realized he was on the verge of babbling, and with an effort, he silenced himself..For the first time in many months, Barty didn't want to sleep in the dark. They left the door of the room open, admitting some of the fluorescent glow from the hallway..A friend's daughter. They say she died in a traffic accident down in San Francisco. She was even younger than Naomi."..Seeing her, Joey leaped up front his armchair again. He managed to hold on to his book this time, but he stumbled into the footstool and nearly lost his balance..Junior didn't make the mistake of thinking that Magusson's new conciliatory attitude meant they were friends, that confidences could be shared or truths exchanged. The money-grubbing toad's only real friend would always be the one he saw in a mirror. If he discovered that Junior was having a great time post-Naomi, Magusson would store the information until he found a way to use it to his advantage."..Better hurry," Wally advised, gracing Celestina's other cheek with a dryer kiss..The tenderness with which Grace acceded to Phimie's desire, at the expense of her own peace of mind, filled Celestina with emotion. She'd always admired and loved her mother to an extent that no words-or work of art-could adequately describe, but never more than now..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?"..Poker." Keeping his hands high, like a penitent confessing sin at a revival meeting and asking God to wash him clean, Obadiah said, "My specialty was close-up magic. Oh, I pulled a rabbit out of a hat more than once, silk scarves from thin air, doves from silk scarves. But close was my love. Coins, but mostly ... cards."..He was still her boy. As always, her boy. Bartholomew. Barty. Her sweetie. Her kiddo..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..From San Francisco south to Orange County Airport on a crowded commuter flight, then farther south along the coast by rental car, Paul Damascus brought Grace, Celestina, and Angel to the Lampion house. "Before we go to my place, there's someone I very much want you to meet. She's not expecting us, but I'm sure it'll be okay."..Junior descended the escalator two steps at a time, not content to let it carry him along at its own pace. When he reached the second floor, however, he found that Vanadium's ghost had done what ghosts do best: faded away. Abandoning his search for the perfect tie chain but determined to remain calm, Junior decided to have lunch at the St. Francis Hotel..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..Thus far, none of these

women of mercy was as lovely as Victoria Bressler, the ice-serving nurse who was hot for him. Nevertheless, he kept looking and remained hopeful..Books were stacked high on a nearby table, favorite novels and volumes of verse, all of which Agnes had read before. With time so limited, she preferred the comfort of the familiar to the possibility that new writers and new stories would fail to please. Paul read to her often, as did Angel. Tom Vanadium sat with her, too, as did Celestina and Grace..Tuesday, January 9, having cashed out a number of investments during the past ten days, Junior made a wire transfer of one and a half million dollars to the Gammoner account in the Grand Cayman bank..Her name was Victoria Bressler, and she was an attractive blonde. She would never have been serious competition For Naomi, because Naomi had been singularly stunning, but Naomi, after all, was gone..Scamp spent Wednesday ravishing him. It wasn't love, but there was comfort in being familiar with his partner's equipment..No one in Junior's circles seemed to care about the crisis in American music. He supposed he had a greater awareness of injustice than did most people..Kathleen expected this would prove to be true. She herself was not frightened by Thomas Vanadium's appearance; but then she had been prepared for it before she first saw him. And she wasn't a murderer, fearful of retribution, to whom this particular face would seem like Judgment personified..Yet for all his love of reading and of music, events suggested that for mathematics he had a still greater aptitude..The symptoms that terrified Phimie-the headache, crippling abdominal pain, dizziness, vision problems-had entirely relented. Possibly they had been more psychological than physical in nature..Now, the hateful music unnerved him. He became convinced that if he went home alone, the phantom chanteuse-whether Victoria Bressler's vengeful ghost or something else-would croon to him once more. He wanted company and distraction, after all..Instead of opening his left fist, Tom lifted his martini with his right, and on the tablecloth under the glass lay the coin..The gurney, one wheel rattling. The young orderly behind it, dressed all in white. And the nurse again.. "That's right," Celestina told Wally. "This isn't wagering. What's wrong with you?"..For eight nights thereafter, Agnes padded the floor with folded blankets on both sides of the boy's bed, insurance against a middle-of-the-night fall. On the eighth morning, she discovered that Barty had returned the blankets to the closet from which she'd gotten them. They were not jammed haphazardly on the shelves-the sure evidence of a child's work-but were folded and stacked as neatly as Agnes herself would have stored them..Friday, December 29, was a grand day: cool but not cold; high scattered clouds ornamenting a Wedgwood-blue sky. The streets were agreeably abustle but not swarming like the corridors of a hive, as sometimes they could be. San Franciscans, reliably a pleasant lot, were still in a holiday mood and, therefore, even quicker to smile and more courteous than usual..Drawn by voices on the second floor, Tom took the stairs two at a time. A man and a boy. Barty and Cain. To the left in the hallway, and then to a room on the right..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..Although he related well to the theme of moral relativism and personal autonomy in a value-neutral world, Junior grew apprehensive about each impending scene of violence, and closed his eyes against the prospect of blood. He resented having to endure ninety minutes of the film before Google finally settled into the seat beside him..A supply of ammunition lined the bottom of all the dresser and bureau drawers, concealed by underwear and other garments. Junior appropriated a box of 9-mm. cartridges.

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