

THE STRANGER

Gorging on fudge cake and coffee to guard against a spontaneous lapse into meditative catatonia, Junior manfully admitted that he had been weak, that he had reacted to the unknown with fear and retreat instead of with bold confrontation. Because each of us can trust no one in this world but himself, self-deceit is dangerous. He liked himself better for this frank admission of weakness.. "I guess so, but it's not that. I was thinking of something my little girl said." 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.. A SEVERE THIRST INDICATED to Agnes that she wasn't dead. There would be no thirst in paradise.. Either Obadiah intuited Agnes's fear or he was motivated by her kindness to reveal his method, after all. "I'm embarrassed to say what you saw wasn't real magician's work. Crude deception. I chose the ace of diamonds exactly because it represents wealth in fortune-telling, so it's a positive card that people respond well to. The ace with your boy's name was prepared beforehand, inserted face up toward the bottom of the deck, so a middle cut wouldn't reveal it." A MOMENTOUS DAY for Celestina, a night of nights, and a new dawn in the forecast: Here began the life about which she'd dreamed since she was a young girl.. Reflections of those tracks appeared as stigmatic tears on the long face of the physician.. During the day and then following a dinner break, the Hackachaks persisted. The hospital had never witnessed such a spectacle. Shifts changed, and new nurses came to attend to Junior in greater numbers than necessary, using any excuse to get a glimpse of the freak show.. He stashed two suitcases full of clothes and toiletries-plus the contents of Pinchbeck's safe-deposit box-in the van, and then added those precious items that he'd be loath to lose if the hit on Bartholomew went wrong, forcing him to leave his Russian Hill life and flee arrest. The works of Caesar Zedd. Sklent's three brilliant paintings. The needlepoint pillows, to which he'd colorfully applied the wisdom of Zedd, constituted the bulk of this collection of bare essentials: 102 pillows in numerous shapes and sizes, which he had completed in just thirteen months of feverish stitchery~. He knew the titles that he wanted: "Tunnel in the Sky, Between Planets, Starman Jones. ". She didn't hear gunfire this time, either, but the hard crack of splintering wood attested to the passage of at least two more bullets.. Eventually, Junior remembered the quarter. He reached into the right pocket of the thin cotton bathrobe, but the coin wasn't there, as it should have been. The left pocket also was empty.. He switched on his flashlight. In the beam, on the blacktop, a silver disc. Like a full moon in a night sky.. He had met her in a university adult-extension course titled "Increasing Self-Esteem Through Controlled Screaming." Participants were taught to identify harmful repressed emotions and dissipate them through the authentic vocal imitations of a variety of animals.. Earlier, the dirty-sheet clouds had been wrung dry. Now, the trees that overhung the house had finally stopped dripping on the cedar shingled roof The night was so still that Agnes could hear the sea softly breaking upon the shore more than half a mile away.. She slept for a while, waking to a prayer spoken softly but fervently in Spanish.. No one seemed to realize that predicting the future might not be a suitable entertainment in this house, at this time, considering that Agnes had so recently and horribly been blindsided by fate.. In the present, long after the execution of Josef Krepp, half a block ahead, lay the Lipscomb house. Beyond it, the Lampion place.. 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.. "Don't worry, love. I'll make sure the snap's are constructed so you can get it off me easily enough." Once he had toured the exhibition, managing not to shudder openly, he tried to hang out within hearing distance of Celestina White, but without appearing to be listening with special intensity.. Industrial Woman, which he'd purchased for a little more than nine thousand dollars, less than eighteen months ago and at another gallery, would fetch at least thirty thousand in the current market, so rapidly had Bavor Poriferan's reputation risen.. 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 White ... Indeed, Junior suspected that they might be here at Vanadium's urging. The cop would be interested in determining how avaricious the mourning husband would prove to be when presented with the opportunity to turn his wife's cold flesh into cash.. Frustrated on many levels, Junior hurried to a parking lot one block from the detective's office, where he'd left his new Chevrolet Impala convertible. This Chinese-red machine was even more beautiful when wet with rain than it had looked polished and pristine on the showroom floor.. Lipscomb women gladly obey the wishes of Lipscomb men-unless they disagree, of course, or don't disagree but are just feeling mulish.. The coin stopped turning across his knuckles and, as though with volition of its own, it slipped into the tight curve of his curled forefinger. With a snap of his thumb, he flipped the quarter into the air.. Kid's room. Bartholomew's room. Furniture in cheerful primary colors. Pooh posters on the wall.. When he came to himself, sick and weak from the poison and with an aching skull, he was in a room with brick walls and bricked-up windows. The door had no bars and no visible lock. But when he tried to get to his feet he felt bonds of sorcery holding his body and mind, resilient, clinging, tightening as he moved. He could stand, but could not take a step towards the door. He could not even reach his hand out. It was a horrible sensation, as if his muscles were not his own. He sat down again and tried to hold still. The spellbonds around his chest kept him from breathing deeply, and his mind felt stifled too, as if his thoughts were crowded into a space too small for them.. As a homicide detective, Vanadium had a career-spanning ninety eight percent closure-and-conviction record on the cases he handled. Once convinced he had found the guilty party, he didn't rely solely on solid police work. He augmented the usual investigative procedures and techniques with his own brand of psychological warfare-sometimes subtle, sometimes not-which frequently encouraged the perpetrator to make mistakes that convicted him.. Celestina intended to capture Nella as she was now, head at rest upon the pillow

of, perhaps, her deathbed, eyes closed and mouth slack, face ashen but serene. Then she would draw four more portraits, using bone structure and other physiological evidence to imagine how the woman had looked at sixty, forty, twenty, and ten..The kids insisted on knowing what was meant by the line about the chicken, and this led to the laying of a coopful of Why-did-the chicken-cross-the-road jokes, which Edom and Jacob had memorized in childhood as an act of rebellion against their humorless father..When Agnes had asked him to deliver the pies, before she had set out with Joey for the hospital the previous day, Edom had wanted to beg off, but he had agreed without hesitation. He was prepared to suffer every viciousness that nature could throw at him in this life, but he could not endure seeing disappointment in his sister's eyes..Against the backdrop of granite monuments, Kaitlin hulked like a moldering presence from Beyond, risen out of a rotting box to take vengeance on the living..A plate-size piece of the door had been blasted away. Because of the light shining through from the room beyond, Junior could see that no part of the lock remained intact. In fact, he peered through the hole in the door to the back of a piece of furniture that was jammed against it, whereupon the nature of the problem became clear to him.. "September 27, 1962. Barcelona, Spain. A flood killed four hundred forty-five people." "Sit down, sit down," Agnes urged. "I can offer coffee now and pie in a little bit." "This is most incommensurate," Junior said, recalling the word from a vocabulary-improvement course, without need of ice applied to the genitals..Later, as Bonita and Francesca proudly served their mother's individually molded Christmas-tree-shaped servings of flan, which they themselves had plated, Barty leaned close to his mother and, pointing to the table in front of them, said softly but excitedly, "Look at the rainbows!" "In a way, he does," Vanadium said. "When you're as hollow as Enoch Cain, the emptiness aches. He's desperate to fill it, but he doesn't have the patience or the commitment to fill it with anything worthwhile. Love, charity, faith, wisdom-those virtues and others are hard won, with commitment and patience, and we acquire them one spoonful at a time. Cain wants to be filled quickly. He wants the emptiness inside poured full, in quick great gushes, and right now. ".The strand was inclined toward the lake. He closed the door and got out of the way as the Studebaker rolled forward, gathering speed..Before Celestina probed and perhaps touched upon a sore tooth of truth, Tom launched into the story of King Obadiah, Pharaoh of the Fantastic, who had taught him all he knew about sleight of hand..An SFPD patrol car swept past, its siren silent, the rack of emergency beacons flashing on its roof..Arriving home, he hesitated to open the door. He expected to find Vanadium inside.. "This is Detective Bellini, with the San Francisco Police Department. Is everything all right there?" The reverend said, "I'm sure you underestimate my parishioners, Celestina. They won't be scandalized. They'll open their hearts." 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..As Lipscomb picked up the freshened baby, Grace said, "That was as effective as any minister's wife could've been with an impossible parishioner-and, oh, do I wish we could sometimes be that pointed."..than the crows. Tumbled on the grass, in fragments: the broken trophy for the prize rose, the symbol of his sinful.This ended any hope of romance, and he was disappointed. A less self-controlled man might have seized a nearby bronze vase-fashioned to resemble dinosaur stool-and stuffed her into it or vice versa..At the top of the candlestick, the drip pan and the socket were marked by a wine-red drizzle. The color of well-aged bloodstains..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..Her lead gaze was still surprisingly clear. How remarkable that the impact hadn't caused a starburst hemorrhage in either of her exquisite, lavender-blue eyes. No blood, lust surprise..With one tiny hand, Barty reached up for his mother. She gave him her forefinger, to which the sugar-bag boy clung tenaciously.. "You'll catch pneumonia," she warned, reaching across the boy to flip the passenger's-side vent toward him..He waited for Otter to nod, but Otter stood motionless..Years earlier, a stream had been diverted to fill the vast excavation. Stock fish were added, mostly trout and bass..Along the hall, every step measured, he stayed near the wall farthest from the staircase..Celestina checked her wristwatch and saw that she was running late. With Angel's short legs and layers of red, there was no point in trying to hurry..Their struggle to put their sorrow into words moved Agnes not because they cared so deeply, but because in the end they were unable to express themselves adequately. Without the relief provided by expression, their anguish grew corrosive. Their lifelong introversion left them without the social skills to unburden themselves or to provide solace to others. Worse, their obsessions with death, in all its many means and mechanisms, had prepared them to expect Barty's cancer, which left them neither shocked nor capable of consolation, but merely resigned. Ultimately, in great frustration, each twin was reduced to fragmented sentences, crippled gestures, quiet tears-and Agnes became the only consoler..Maria said, "It is ... the only thing ... I can do for him now, for you. I be nobody, not..Under a sullen afternoon sky, in the winter-drab hills, the yellow-and-white station wagon was a bright arrow, drawn and fired not from a hunter's quiver but from that of a Samaritan..She shivered, and Edom, thinking that she had caught a chill ripped off his suit jacket and draped it over her shoulders..Hound shrugged. He didn't choose to tell Losen that people hated him disinterestedly..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..Junior hurried out of the kitchen and along the hallway to the front door. He ran silently, landing on his toes like a dancer. His natural athletic grace was one of the things that drew so many women to him..Naomi's beautiful countenance rose in his mind, and she looked beautiful for a moment, but then he thought he saw a certain slyness in her angelic smile, a disturbing glint of calculation in her once loving eyes..Sweet-tempered, generous, honest, kind Naomi had surely been incapable of murdering anyone-least of all the man she loved.. "She reads too much hard-boiled detective fiction," Nolly said. "And lately, she's talking about writing it."..He desperately needed closure in the matter of Naomi's death. That was what these

past three years and these supernatural events were all about. With his ringleted yellow hair, coiled mustache, and haughty right file, this was a jack that looked as if he might be a knave in the worst sense of the word. He found the strength to squeeze her hand tighter than before. "Be safe. Keep Angel safe." Also in the drawer was a pistol that he kept for home defense. He stared at it, trying to decide whether to go downstairs and make a sandwich or kill himself. "Don't you say that. The society isn't silly, especially not now. It's us, it's what we were and how we are, and I do so much love everything that's us." Rubbermaid container from his own pantry. Junior would never again use it to store leftover soup. Having arrived at this same astonishing but nonetheless obvious conclusion, Harrison said, "Someone has to've been hurt." He hurried out of the kitchen, through the dining room, with Paul close behind him. "If he gets back within the next hour, better ring me at his place so I can scoot." 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. 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. Her belief in fortune-telling and in the curious ritual she was about to undertake weren't condoned by the Church. Mysticism of this sort was, in fact, considered to be a sin, a distraction from faith and a perversion of it. Maria arrived early, expecting to assist with final details in the kitchen. Though honored to be a guest, she wasn't able to stand by with a glass of wine while preparations remained to be made. He still had work to do here. Properly disposing of Thomas Vanadium, however, was the most urgent piece of business. "Maybe." In truth, Tom didn't believe that any of this could be learned even by one adept taking instruction from another adept. They were born with the same special perception, but with different and strictly limited abilities to interact with the multiplicity of worlds that they could detect. He wasn't able to explain even to himself how he could send a coin or other small object Elsewhere; it was something he just felt, and each time that the coin vanished, the authenticity of the feeling was proved. He suspected that when Barty walked where the rain wasn't, the boy employed no conscious techniques; he simply decided to walk in a dry world while otherwise remaining in this wet one—and then he did. Woefully incomplete wizards, sorcerers with just a trick or two each, they had no secret tome of enchantments and spells to teach to an apprentice. 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. "Don't get me started on cyclones!" Edom hurried through the house and out to the station wagon, to fetch the boxes of groceries. All day, for reasons he couldn't quite put into words, Junior had carried that quarter in a pocket of his bathrobe. From time to time, he had taken it out to examine it. "Not only coal miners. Old as you are in some ways, you're still too young for me to explain. I will someday." Smiling again, speaking in a voice hardly louder than a whisper, he said, "Got a wedding date to keep." Artificial eyes were on order. He would soon return to Newport Beach for a third fitting before implant. They weren't glass, as commonly believed, but thin plastic shells that fit neatly behind the eyelids in the cavities left after surgery. On the inner surface of the transparent artificial cornea, the artificial iris would be skillfully hand-painted, and movement of the ocular prosthesis could be achieved by attaching the eye-moving muscles to the conjunctiva. Three years ago, in St. Mary's Hospital, with Phimie's warning fresh in her mind, Celestina swore that she would be ready when the beast came, but here he came, and she was as not ready as possible. Time passes, the perception of a threat fades, life becomes busier, you work your butt off as a waitress, you graduate college, your little girl grows to be so vital, so vivid, so alive that you know she just has to live forever, and after all, you are the daughter of a minister, a believer in the power of compassion, in the Prince of Peace, confident that the meek shall inherit the earth, so in three long years, you don't buy a gun, nor do you take any training in self-defense, and somehow you forget that the meek who will one day inherit the earth are those who forego aggression but are not those so pathetically meek that they won't even defend themselves, because a failure to resist evil is a sin, and the willful refusal to defend your life is the mortal sin of passive suicide, and the failure to protect a little yellow M&M girl will surely buy you a ticket to Hell on the same express train on which the slave traders rode to their own eternal enslavement, on which the masters of Dachau and old Joe Stalin traveled from power to punishment, so here, now, as the beast throws himself against the door, as he shoves aside the barricade, with what precious little time you have left, fight. Junior shoved through the blocked door, into the bedroom, and the bitch hit him with a chair. A small, slat-back side chair with a tie-on seat cushion. She swung it like a baseball bat, and there must have been some Jackie Robinson blood in the White family line, because she had the power to knock a fastball from Brooklyn to the Bronx. As though one of the quarters had dropped into his ear and triggered a golden oldie in the jukebox of his mind, Junior heard Vanadium's voice in the hospital room, in Spruce Hills, on the night of the day when Naomi died: "en you cut Naomi's string, you put an end to the effects that her music would have on the lives of others and on the shape of the future.....Barty, thirteen years old but listening to books at a postgraduate college level, had no doubt studied leukemia while they were awaiting the test results, to prepare himself to fully understand the diagnosis on first receiving it. He tried not to look stricken when he heard acute myeloblastic, which was the worst form of the disease, but he appeared more ghostly in his pretense than if he had revealed his understanding. Had his eyes not been artificial, his stiff-upper-lip pose would have been utterly unconvincing. Although this was perhaps the happiest evening of Celestina's life, it wasn't without a note of melancholy. She couldn't avoid thinking about Phimie. Raising his revolver, Tom squeezed off two shots, but the gun didn't discharge. Piano music drifted into the restaurant from the adjacent bar, so soft and yet sprightly that it made the clink of silverware seem like music, too. It's been a joy to me to go back to Earthsea and find it still there, entirely familiar, and yet changed and still changing. What I

thought was going to happen isn't what's happening, people aren't who-or what-I thought they were, and I lose my way on islands I thought I knew by heart..Caution discarded, Junior went inside, for the same reason that a dedicated opera aesthete might once a decade attend a country-music concert: to confirm the superiority of his taste and to be amused by what passed for music among the great unwashed. Some might call it slumming..Because of her occasional bad dreams, Angel chose to sleep now and then in her mother's bed instead of in her own room, and this was one of those nights..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..She hadn't sung since the early-morning hours of October 18, and no other paranormal event had occurred since then. The waiting between manifestations scraped at Junior's nerves worse than the manifestations themselves..unwittingly oversell any strong reaction, striking a false note and raising suspicions.. "This is for Zelda," Junior said, ramming forward across the threshold with the knife..The musician's behavior required explanation. After wending through the crowd, Junior located the man in front of a painting so egregiously beautiful that any connoisseur of real art could hardly resist the urge to slash the canvas to ribbons..If the state police did get involved, and even if they found evidence that the accident was staged, they would most likely point the finger of blame at the man for whom Victoria had been preparing dinner..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.Maybe the bright side was that the musician hadn't either wet his pants or taken a dump while in his death throes. Sometimes, during a comparatively slow death like strangulation, the victim lost control of all bodily functions. He'd read it in a novel, something from the Book-of-the-Month Club and therefore both life-enriching and reliable. Probably not Eudora Welty. Maybe Norman Mailer. Anyway, the men's room didn't smell as fresh as a flower shop, but it didn't reek, either..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.. "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." "AND I DRINK CHAMPAGNE ALL DAY," said Miss Cheese, pronouncing it "cham-pay-non." He either detected their well-concealed surprise or assumed they would be curious as to why, in spite of extensive surgery, he still wore this Boris Karloff face..Here, now, the dinner guest, entering the kitchen. He carried the wineglass and the rose in his left hand. The Merlot was tucked under his arm. In his right hand was a small, brightly wrapped gift box..Barty came out of the house with the library copy of Podkayne Of Mary, which his mother had promised to read to him later, in the hospital. "Are we all going?" he asked.. "I'm saying, for all I know." She took her hand off his thigh. "What's all this about Celestina, anyway?" By his twelfth month, he was toilet-trained, and every time that he had the need to use his colorful little bathroom chair, he proudly and repeatedly announced to everyone, "Barty potty." On that busy night, with Vanadium's corpse in the Studebaker and Victoria's cadaver awaiting a fiery disposal at her house, Junior was too distracted to recognize the pertinence of the message. Now it tormented him from a dark nook in his subconscious..Junior glanced over his shoulder even as Celestina turned and fled. He caught only a glimpse of her disappearing into the inner hallway..Darkness, the one source of childhood fear that most adults never quite outgrow, held no terror for Barty. Although for a while his bedroom featured a Mickey Mouse night-light, the miniature lamp was there not to soothe the boy, but to quiet his mother's nerves, because she worried about him waking alone, in blackness..Two of her largest and best paintings were in the show windows, dramatically lighted. They were dazzling. They were dreadful. They were beautiful. They were hideous.. "Did they rush you straight in here or did you arrange all the insurance matters at reception, Mr. Pinchbeck?" Obadiah tossed the pack of cards to Edom, startling him. "Son, you'll have to help me. My fingers have no finesse anymore." Now, twenty-four hours later, when Sparky answered his telephone and heard Tom Vanadium, he said, "You looking for a little company? I've got another bottle of Merlot where the last one came from." At best, Vanadium might decide Junior had come here to learn what other funeral his nemesis had attended-which was, in fact, the true motivation. But this made it clear that Junior feared him and was striving to stay one step ahead of him. Innocent men didn't go to such length. As far as the fruitcake cop was concerned, Junior might as well have painted I killed Naomi on his forehead..In Junior's estimation, this was not the way that a normal person lived. This was the home of a deranged loner, a dangerously obsessive man.. "If he and Agnes were your age, I'd agree. But she's got ten years on you, and he's got twenty, and no previous generations were as wild as yours." with an encircling and suggestive lick, and then licked his lips, too, when the cold steel slipped free of them.. "April 23, 1940, Natchez, Mississippi, dance-hall fire-one hundred ninety-eight dead. December 7, 1946, Atlanta, Georgia, the Winecoff Hotel fire-one hundred nineteen dead." He was, admittedly, surprised that Nurse Bressler was strongly compelled to come on to him even though she had read his patient file and knew that he'd recently been a veritable geyser of noxious spew, that during the violent seizure in the ambulance, he had also lost control of bladder and bowels, and that he might at any moment suffer an explosive relapse. This was a remarkable testament to the animal lust he inspired even without trying, to the powerful male magnetism that was as much a part of him as his thick blond hair..From his early adolescence, Edom was drawn to gardening, taking special pleasure in the cultivation of hybrid roses. He'd been only sixteen when one of his blooms earned first place in a flower show. When his father learned about the competition, he regarded Edom's pursuit of the prize as a grievous sin of pride. The punishment left Edom bedridden for three days, and when he came downstairs at last, he discovered that his father had torn out all the rose bushes..Her case of polio had been so severe that braces and crutches were never an option. Muscle rehabilitation had been

ineffective..Writing came with reading, and in a notebook, he began to make entries about points of interest in the stories that he enjoyed. His Diary of a Book Reader, as he titled it, fascinated Agnes, who read it with his permission; these notes to himself were enthusiastic, earnest, and charming-but literally month by month, Agnes noticed that they grew less naive, more complex, more contemplative..must either change her mind or commit herself to a more difficult and challenging life than any she had envisioned only this morning.