

LES NUITS DORIENT CONTES NOCTURNES

The musician had no talent for deception. His hopping-hen eyes pecked at the nearest painting, at other guests, down at the floor, everywhere but directly at Junior, and a nerve twitched in his left cheek. "Well, I'm very good, you know, at faces, they stick with me, I don't know why. Goodness knows, my memory is otherwise shot." Celestina hadn't noticed the infant being taken away. She had wanted to see it once more, even though she was sickened by the sight of it. 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?" The upper end of the bed was elevated. Otherwise, Agnes would not have been able to see the room, for she was too weak to raise her head from the pillows. In the minister's house, Junior had seen no indications of a sister. No family photos, no high-school graduation portrait proudly framed. Of course, he had not been interested in their family, for he had been all-consumed by Seraphim. The popeyed little toad smirked over there on the far side of his pretentious desk. Eventually Junior crossed the room to stand before Industrial Woman in all her scrap-metal glory. Her soup-pot breasts reminded him of Frieda's equally abundant bosom, and unfortunately her mouth, open wide in a silent shriek, reminded him of Frieda retching. Junior stalked her, but she eluded him. Always, the song seemed to arise from the next room, but when he passed through the doorway into that space, the voice then sounded as if it came from the room that he'd just left. "Jacob scares people," Agnes said. "No one would eat a pie that Jacob delivered without having it tested at a lab." Junior closed his weary eyes and gratefully submitted as the paramedic wiped his greasy face and his crusted lips with a cool, damp cloth. Aware of the dangers of dehydration, he drank a bottle of water and put two half-gallon containers of Gatorade in the Suburban. After a silent moment of surprise, Nork or Knacker, or Hisscus, said, "Your sentiment is understandable, Mr. Cain, but it's customary in these matters--". The missing paintings. The missing collection of Zedd's books. You didn't take these things with you for a weekend in Reno. You took them if you thought you might never be coming back. By the time he reached the airport, located a private-charter company, chased up the owner through the night-security man, and arranged to be flown at once to Eugene, Oregon, aboard a twin-engine Cessna, the points of pain in his face had begun to throb. straddles him, driving big fists into his back, brutally into his sides. With high fences and hedgerows of Indian laurels. 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. Tom Vanadium, on the other hand, was certain that Cain, having prepared for the possibility that something would go wrong during his assault on Celestina, wouldn't be easy to locate or to apprehend. In Vanadium's view, the maniac either had a bolt-hole waiting in the city or was already out of the SFPD's jurisdiction. Friday, after dinner, when he'd heard enough of Maria's method of fortune-telling to know that four decks were required, that only every third draw was read, and that aces-especially red aces-were the most propitious cards to receive, Jacob had taken great pleasure in preparing for Barty the most favorable first eight cards that could possibly be dealt. This was a small gift to cheer Agnes, on whose heart Joey's death weighed as heavily as iron chains. "Quitting medicine?" Celestina asked, baffled by his announcement and his upbeat attitude. In his seventies but vigorous and full of fun, Sparky liked to take an occasional jaunt to Reno, to pump the slot machines and try a few hands of blackjack. The off-the-record, tax-free monthly checks from Simon were gratefully received, ensuring the old man's cooperation with the conspiracy. "A friend's daughter. They say she died in a traffic accident down in San Francisco. She was even younger than Naomi." 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. It occurred to her that the knave had come, as foretold by the cards on that night long ago. She had expected the knave to be a man with sharp eyes and a wicked heart, but the curse was cancer and not a man at all. Widening his eyes in calculated surprise, Junior said, "Are you a police officer?" The instant he flipped the coin, he opened both hands-palms up, fingers spread-with a distracting flourish. By the time he put his suitcase and three boxes of books--the collected works of Zedd and selections from the Book-of-the-Month Club-in the Suburban, Junior had rushed twice more to the bathroom. His legs were shaky, and he felt hollow, frail, as if he'd lost more than was apparent, as if the essential substance of himself was gone. The lack of offensive odors indicated that he hadn't landed in a container filled with organic garbage. In the blackness, judging only by feel, he decided that almost everything was in plastic trash bags, the contents of which were relatively soft-probably paper refuse. Junior Cain was committed to continuous self-improvement. He believed in the need constantly to expand his knowledge and horizons order to better understand himself and the world. The quality of life was solely the responsibility of oneself he author of *How to Have a Healthier Life through Autohypnosis* was Dr. Caesar Zedd, a renowned psychologist and best-selling author of a dozen self-help texts, all of which Junior owned in addition to the literature that he had acquired from the book club. When he had been only fourteen, he'd begun buying Dr. Zedd's titles in paperback, and by the time he was eighteen, when he could afford to do so, he'd replaced the paperbacks with hardcovers and thereafter bought all the doctor's new books in the higher-priced editions. The collected works. He slipped the card out from under the change, turned it over. A joker. Printed in red block letters across the card was a name, BARTHOLOMEW. murdered would be discounted. And if every death was suspicious to him, then he would quickly lose interest in Junior and move on to a new enthusiasm, harassing some other poor devil. Caesar Zedd teaches that every experience in our lives, unto the smallest moment and simplest act, is preserved in memory, including every witless conversation we've ever endured with the worst dullards we've met. For this reason, he wrote a book about why we must never suffer bores and fools and about how we can be rid of them, offering hundreds of strategies for scouring them from our lives, including homicide, which he claims to favor, though only tongue-in-cheek. 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..Similarities between Naomi and her mom- ended with appearances. Sheena was loud, crass, self-absorbed, and had the vocabulary of a brothel owner specializing in service to sailors with Tourette's syndrome..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..After wiping her floury hands, Agnes took the book from him and, examining it, could find nothing wrong. She flipped back a few pages, then a few forward, but the lines of type were crisp and clear. "Show me where, honey.".THE MORNING THAT it happened was bright and blue in March, two months after Barty took Angel for a dry walk in wet weather, seven weeks after Celestina married Wally, and five weeks after the happy newlyweds completed their purchase of the Galloway house next door to the Lampion place. Selma Galloway, retired from a professorship years earlier, had subsequently retired further, taking advantage of the equity in her long-owned home to buy a little condo on the beach in nearby Carlsbad..Neddy occupied the entire spacious fourth floor of the house. The third and second floors were each divided into two apartments, the ground floor into four studio units, all of which he rented out..Dr. Lipscomb brought his hands to his face, covering his nose and mouth as earlier they had been covered with a surgical mask, as though he were in danger of drawing in, with his breath, an idea that would forever change him..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..Vanadium was no ordinary cop, as he himself had said. In his obsession, convinced that Junior had murdered Naomi and impatient with the need to find evidence to prove it, what was to stop the detective if he decided to deal out justice himself? What was to prevent him from walking up to the Suburban right now and shooting his suspect pointblank?.Later, at home, after Agnes sent Edom back to his apartment, she opened a bottle of vodka that she had bought on the way back from Maria's. She mixed it with orange juice in a waterglass..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..Perhaps he would not have leaped along this chain of conclusions if he'd not been an admirer of Caesar Zedd, for Zedd teaches that too often society encourages us to dismiss certain insights as illogical, even when in fact these insights arise from animal instinct and are the closest thing to unalloyed truth we will ever know..After the song concluded, Junior felt better. His heartbeat soon returned to normal. The damp palms of his hands grew dry..Reminding himself that nature was merely a dumb machine, utterly devoid of mystery, and that the unknown would always prove familiar if you dared to lift its veil, Junior discovered he could move. Each of his feet seemed to weigh as much as one of Wroth Griskin's cast bronzes, but he crossed the sidewalk and went into Galerie Coquin..Like the chicken egg. As weary as she was, Agnes could not at once puzzle out the meaning of those four words. Then: "Oh. He's in an incubator.". "Retinoblastoma is usually unilateral," Dr. Chan continued, "occurring in one eye. Bartholomew has tumors in both.". "From 1604 through 1610, Erzebet Bathory, sister of the Polish king, with the assistance of her servants, tortured and killed six hundred girls. She bit them, drank their blood, tore their faces off with tongs, mutilated their private parts, and mocked their screams.". "Sure. Or why don't I pull a Rumpelstiltskin and demand one of her children for payment' ". Grace, proving again the aptness of her name, said the one thing most likely, in time, to bring true peace to Celestina. "Remember Bartholomew.". "I don't just think so. And I don't just know it. I feel it, exactly like you feel all the ways things are. I'll bet you feel it, too.". "What's below us?" Hound pointed to the floor, paved with rough slate flags..Nellie found the strength to rise, but having risen, she was unable to speak. Her mouth shaped words, but her voice deserted her..Agnes's chilled bones. Pushing a tangle of wet hair away from her face, she realized that her hands were shaking..The baby felt too light to be real. She weighed five pounds fourteen ounces, but she seemed lighter than air, as though she might float up and out of her aunt's arms.. "Yes, you did, and it's exactly what experience has no doubt taught you to think. But I'm forty-seven and you're twenty-". As beautiful as they were, none of these women satisfied him as profoundly as Naomi had satisfied him.. "It's chilly and foggy and late, and there might be villains afoot at this hour," he intoned with mock gravity. "The two of you are Lipscomb women now, or soon will be, and Lipscomb women never go unescorted through the dangerous urban night.". She told him to stay on the line, stay on no matter what, told him to keep talking to her, and he hung up..Glorying in the cloudless day and the warmer than usual weather, he drove seventy miles north, through phalanxes of evergreens that marched down the steep hills to the scenic coast. All the way, he monitored the traffic in his rearview mirror. No one followed him..According to the brief biographic note with the picture, Celestina White was a graduate of San Francisco's Academy of Art College. She had been born and raised in Spruce Hills, Oregon, the daughter of a minister..By Friday morning, September 10, little more than forty-eight hours after the shooting, he felt good and was in fine spirits..playing cards, Agnes fixated on Deed's blond bangs, which curled across his broad brow..WHEN AT LAST Paul Damascus reached the parsonage late Friday afternoon, January 12, he arrived on foot, as he arrived everywhere these days..He bought knives. And then sheaths for the knives. He acquired a knife-sharpening kit and spent the evening grinding blades..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..Three times, Mary vanished, and three times she reappeared, before she led the bamboozled Koko to her mother and father. "Neat, huh?". His mouth was dry when he said to Angel,

"Well, it seems pretty magical to me-that flipped-coin trick." He turned over the two most recent discards. Neither was a jack of spades, and both were what he expected them to be..Running footsteps, heading toward the ambulance. Apparently Kenny. The second paramedic..From these ominous spatters, several fibers bristled, having stuck to the pewter when the drizzle was still wet. They appeared to be human hairs.."I've always wanted to learn the piano myself," Junior claimed, "but I guess you really have to start young."..gob of mucus in his throat. His face contorted with a misery that he did not have to fake, and he was astonished to feel tears spring to his eyes.."Sitters. Friends, relatives of friends. People I can trust. I can afford sitters if I'm getting only dinner tips."..He was surprised they had come so soon, less than twenty-four hours after the tragedy. This was especially unusual, considering that a homicide detective was obsessed with the idea that rotting wood, alone, was not responsible for Naomi's death..He had difficulty picturing the detective pattering in the garden on weekends. Unless there were bodies buried under the roses..She refused to look at him, the way her mother had refused to look at him when he'd been making love to her in the parsonage. She began twisting a red pencil in a handheld sharpener, making sure that the shavings fell into a can kept for that purpose. "I saw it here."..Earlier in the week, Junior had looked up Thomas Vanadium in the telephone directory. He expected the number to be unlisted, but it was published. What he wanted more than a number was an address, and he found that as well.."You'd never cheat me. I know you. We'd have Christmas twice a year and parties for half birthdays."..The subcontractor who built the quarter-spitting coin boxes was James Hunnicolt, but everyone called him Jimmy Gadget. He specialized in electronic eavesdropping, building cameras and recorders into the most unlikely objects, but he could do just about anything requiring inventive mechanical design and construction.."By the way he acted, you'd have sworn that he gave me and Angel shelter in the storm, back then, instead of turning us out to freeze in the snow.".."Good heavens, Vinnie, I know that," she assured him as she lifted Barty-hardly bigger than a bag of sugar-from the bassinet. She settled with the baby into a rocking chair..After a while, he dared to crack his eyelids. Pressing against his eyes was a blackness as smooth and as unrelenting as any known by a blind man. Not even a ghost of light haunted the night beyond the window, and the slats of the venetian blind were as hidden from view as the meatless ribs under Death's voluminous black robe..Immediately at the thought of regurgitation, his abdominal muscles contracted like those of a laboratory frog zapped by an electric current, and he choked on a rising horror.."I'm sure you would be, yes, but I'm afraid I don't have the patience to teach, I'm a performer, not an instructor. I suppose I could give you the name of a good teacher."..Before Junior had become a physical therapist, he had considered studying to be a dentist. A low tolerance for the stench of halitosis born of gum disease had decided him against dentistry, but he still could appreciate a set of teeth as exceptional as these..Nolly adored her laugh, so musical and girlish. He would have made all sorts of a fool out of himself, anytime, just to hear it..An emergency kit in the trunk of his car contained a flashlight. He fetched it and sweetened the bribe to the valet..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..All three of these sorry excuses for human beings were money mad. Rudy owned six successful used-car dealerships and--his pride--a Ford franchise selling new and used vehicles, in five Oregon communities, but he liked to live large; he also visited Vegas four times a year, pouring money away as casually as he might empty his bladder. Sheena enjoyed Vegas, too, and was a fiend for shopping. Kaitlin liked men, pretty ones, but since she might be mistaken for her father in a dimly lighted room, her hunks came at a price..He'd listened to the message and thought it incomprehensible, of no import. Suddenly, tardy intuition told him that it could not have been any more important to him if it had been dead Naomi calling from beyond the grave to leave testimony for the detective..Edom bit his lower lip, shook his head, and stubbornly clung to Barty's left foot..He almost laughed at himself, but he recalled the disconcerting laugh that earlier had trilled from him in the men's room, when he'd thought about stuffing Neddy Gnathic into the toilet. Now he pinched his tongue between his teeth almost hard enough to draw blood, hoping to prevent that brittle and mirthless sound from escaping him again..AT THE END OF THE fourth book of Earthsea, Tehanu, the story had arrived at what I felt to be now. And, just as in the now of the so-called real world, I didn't know what would happen next. I could guess, foretell, fear, hope, but I didn't know..Another thought: The young gallery employee would remember that Junior had asked after Neddy and had followed him toward the men's room. He would provide a description, and because he was an art connoisseur, therefore visually oriented, he'd most likely provide a good description, and what the police artist drew wouldn't be some cubist vision in the Picasso mode or a blurry impressionistic sketch, but a portrait filled with vivid and realistic detail, like a Norman Rockwell painting, ensuring apprehension..More walls than not, in both rooms, were lined with bookshelves and file cabinets. Here he kept numerous case studies of accidents, man-made disasters, serial killers, spree killers: proof undeniable that humanity was a fallen species engaged in both the unintentional and calculated destruction of itself..Some information she'd withheld from him: that the cancer might already have spread, that he might still die even after his eyes were removed-and that if it hadn't yet spread, it might soon do so..Unable to run, he raised his arms defensively, crossing them in front of his face, though the impact of the coins wasn't painful. Volleys flicked off his fingers, palms, and wrists..In the dark dumpster, tormented by ceaseless torrents of what-ifs, convinced that the spirit of Vanadium was going to slam the lid and lock him in with a revived corpse, Junior had for a while been reduced to the condition of a helpless child. Paralyzed by fear, withdrawn to the corner of the dumpster farthest from the putrefying pianist, squatting in trash, he had shaken with such violence that his castanet teeth had chattered in a frenzied flamenco rhythm to which his bones seemed to knock, knock, like boot heels on a dance floor. He had heard himself whimpering but couldn't stop, had felt tears of shame burning down his cheeks but couldn't halt the flow, had felt his bladder ready to burst from the needle prick of terror but bad with heroic effort managed to refrain from wetting his pants..Although weak, he was no longer in danger of spewing bile and blood

like a harpooned whale. The siege had passed.

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