

## MESSY CAKE

Because of the events regarding Barty and Angel back in January, Celestina, Grace, and Wally were no longer displaced persons waiting to return to San Francisco. They had begun anew here in Bright Beach; and judging by all indications, they were going to be as happy and as occupied with useful work as it was possible to be on this troubled side of the grave.. "Who else? I think there's romance in the air. The cow-eyed way he looks at her, she could knock his knees out from under him just by giving him a wink." Later, at home, he gargled until he had drained half a bottle of mint-flavored mouthwash, took the longest shower of his life, and then used the other half of the mouthwash.. This was the image that plied the turbulent waters of Junior Cain's imagination when he sailed out of the driver's door and came around to face the Studebaker, his heart dropping like an anchor.. Edom did as asked. Then he cut the deck into two approximately equal stacks when requested to do so.. The Finder. Agnes found herself drifting up. A frightening sense of weightlessness overcame her.. 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." The reverend said, "I'm sure you underestimate my parishioners, Celestina. They won't be scandalized. They'll open their hearts." "I see. Sometimes. Just quick. For like a blink. Like when you stand between two mirrors. You know?" To look entirely like her name, she needed only white wings. He would give her wings: a short flight out the window, into the oak.. Edom and Jacob came to the house, asking what Dr. Chan had said, and Agnes lied to them. "There are some test results we won't have until Monday, but he thinks Barty is going to be all right." Agnes ran to the kitchen, where she had been working when the doorbell rang, packing boxes of groceries to be delivered with the honey-raisin pear pies that she and Jacob had baked this morning.. 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?" Junior had the picture now. Clear as Kodachrome. Victoria was in a relationship, and she had come on to him in the hospital not because she was looking for more action, but because she was a tease. One of those women who thought it was funny to get a man's juices up and then leave him stewing in them.. Many nights, his sleep wasn't half as restful as he would have wished, for he often dreamed of walking in a wasteland. Sometimes, desert salt flats stretched in all directions, with here and there a monument of weather-gnarled rock, all baking under a merciless sun. Sometimes, the salt was snow, and the monuments of rock were ridges of ice, revealed in the hard glare of a cold sun. Regardless of the landscape, he walked slowly, though he had the desire and the energy to proceed faster. His frustration built until it was so intolerable that he woke, kicking in the tangled sheets, restless and edgy.. 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.. The following morning, he canceled his German lessons. It was an impossible language. The words were enormously long.. Cypresses lined the entry drive to the cemetery. Tall and solemn, the trees kept guard, as though posted to prevent restless spirits from roaming out into the land of the living.. Extending his hand, watching the pianist closely, Junior said, "My name's Richard Gammoner." The boy-wonder physician turned to Junior again and assumed an expression of compassion so inauthentic that if he'd been playing a doctor on even the cheesiest daytime soap opera, he'd have been stripped of his actor's-union card, fired, and possibly horsewhipped on a live television special. "We'll be doing the procedure this afternoon, so I wouldn't want to give you anything much for the pain just prior to anesthesia and sedation. But don't you worry, Mr. Pinchbeck. Once we've lanced these boils, when you wake up, ninety percent of the pain will be gone." 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." Missing windshield. Considering that the space was pinched by the crumpled roof, however, and in light of Agnes's pregnancy and imminent second-stage labor, the severe contortions involved in this extraction would be too dangerous.. "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.. "Your forgiveness won't make any of it right," he said, "nothing could, but it might start to give me a little peace." Not a door opened in the narrow street. Nobody looked out to see what the noise was. Not till long after the men were gone did some neighbors creep out to comfort Otter's people as best they could. "Oh, it's a curse, a curse, this wizardry!" they said.. If Cain had been attracted to one woman by her looks, surely he would be attracted to the other. And perhaps the sisters shared a quality other than beauty that drew Cain with even greater power. Innocence, perhaps, or goodness: both foods for a demon.. In addition to mulling over strategy, Tom had spent a lot of time lately brooding about culpability: his own, not Cain's. By seizing on the name that he heard Cain speak in a dream, by making use of it in this psychological warfare, had he been the architect of the killer's Bartholomew obsession, or if not the architect, then at least an assisting.. He had experienced considerable self-revelation during the past eighteen hours, but of all the new qualities he had discovered in himself, Junior was most proud of the realization that he was such a profoundly sensitive person. This was an admirable character trait, but it would also be a useful screen behind which to commit whatever ruthless acts were required in this dangerous new life he'd chosen.. "Everyone knows about Vanadium. He's a crusader, self-appointed champion of truth, justice, and the American way. A holy fool, if you

will. With the case closed, he has no authority to harass you." "I'm captivated more by painting than I am by most dimensional work," Junior explained. "Really, the only sculpture I've acquired is Poriferan's." The quarter, surely. The one that had not been in his robe pocket where it should have been, the previous Friday. During the cleaning, installation of new carpet, and painting that had followed the removal of the diarrhetic pig set loose by one of Cain's disgruntled girlfriends, the wife killer had spent a few nights in a hotel. Nolly took advantage of the opportunity to bring his associate James Hunnicolt--Jimmy Gadget--onto the premises to provide a customized, undetectable, exterior window-latch release. Even above the piston-knock of her heart and the bellows-wheeze of her breath, Celestina heard wood crack, a small pane of glass explode, and metal torque with a squeal. The creep was going to get away. Murmuring on the edge of sleep, Barty spoke to his father in all the places where Joey still lived: "Good-night, Daddy." "I already told you--anything in your heart is as easy to read as the open page of a book." Taking her silence for assent, Tom continued: "Your father is gone from here, gone forever, but he still lives in other worlds. This isn't a statement of faith alone. If Albert Einstein were still alive and standing here, he'd tell you that it's true. Your father is with you in many places, and so is Phimie. In many places, she didn't die in childbirth. In some worlds, she was never raped, her life never blighted. But there's an irony in that, isn't there? Because in those worlds, Angel doesn't exist--yet Angel is a miracle and a blessing." He looked up from the city to the woman. "So when you're lying in bed tonight, kept awake by grief, don't think just about what you've lost with your father and Phimie. Think about what you have in this world that you've never known in some others--Angel. Whether God's a Catholic, a Baptist, a Jew, a Muslim, or a quantum mechanic, He gives us compensation for our pain, compensation right here in this world, not just in those parallel to it and not just in some afterlife. Always compensation for the pain ... if we recognize it when we see it." "But before you leave St. Mary's," the physician said, "I'd like a few mutes of your time. It's very important to me. Personally." Angel returned to the table for apple juice and to announce, "They got a cookie-jar Jesus!" A sudden strange weakness, a formless dread, dropped Agnes out of her crouch and onto her knees beside the boy. Friday, January 14, eight days after Joey's death, Agnes closed the sofa bed, intending to sleep upstairs from now on. And for the first time, since coming home, she cooked dinner without resort to friends'. In a swirl of London Fog and righteous indignation, Neddy turned his back on Junior and drifted away through the nibbling, nattering crowd. Yet the most enduring relationship he had all year was with the ghostly singer. On February 18, he returned home in the afternoon, from a class in spirit channeling, and heard singing as he opened his front door. That same voice. And the same hateful song. As faint as before, repeatedly rising and falling. 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. Using a false name, claiming that he was an adoptee, Junior made inquiries with several child-placement organizations, as well as with state and federal agencies. He discovered that Wulfstan's story was true: Adoption records were sealed by law for the protection of the birth parents, and getting at them was all but impossible. This Monday afternoon, he longed for the escape and solace of half-hour pulp adventure. But he decided that he ought to at last compose the letter he'd been meaning to write for at least ten days. "Why do they let a man like that keep his badge?" Junior asked. "He's outrageous, wholly unprofessional." Junior liked women who drank a lot. They were usually amorous or at least unresistant. A knife already lay on the counter nearby. He used it to slice four pats of butter, yellow and creamy, each half an inch thick, off the end of the stick. "That's right," Celestina told Wally. "This isn't wagering. What's wrong with you?" Although weak, he was no longer in danger of spewing bile and blood like a harpooned whale. The siege had passed. He'd once spoken that very sentiment to her. Golden haze, sun in the heart. His words had melted her, tears had sprung into her eyes, and sex been better than ever. He was uncomfortable, achy, thirsty, but he remained utterly still and observant. After a while, he realized that the sense of oppression with which he'd awakened was not entirely a psychological symptom: Something heavy lay across his abdomen. And it was cold--so cold, in fact, that it had numbed his middle to the extent that he hadn't immediately felt the chill of it. Shivers coursed through him. He clenched his jaws to prevent his teeth from chattering and thereby alerting the man in the chair. Although he never took his eyes off the comer, Junior became preoccupied with trying to puzzle out what was draped across his midsection. The mysterious observer made him sufficiently nervous that he couldn't order his thoughts as well as usual, and the effort to prevent the shivers from shaking a sound out of him only further interfered with his ability to reason. The longer that he was unable to identify the frigid object, the more alarmed he became. He almost cried out when into his mind oozed an image of Naomi's dead body, now past the whitest shade of pale, as gray as the faint light at the window and turning pale green in a few places, and cold, all the heat of life gone from her flesh, which was not yet simmering with any of the heat of decomposition that would soon enliven it again. Barty's math and reading skills exceeded those of most eighteen year-olds, but regardless of his brilliance, he was a few days shy of his third birthday. Prodigies were not necessarily as emotionally mature as they were intellectually developed, but Barty listened with sober attention, asked questions, and then sat in silence, staring at the book in his hands, with neither tears nor apparent fear. "Whatever you're paying here, that's what you'll pay for the new place," Lipscomb said. Symptoms of food poisoning usually appear within two hours of dining. The hideous intestinal spasms had rocked him at least six hours after he'd eaten. Besides, if the culprit were food poisoning, he would have vomited; but he hadn't felt any urge to spew. Celestina stared out for a moment, and then turned her head to look at Tom, with both the shade of the night and the sparkle of the metropolis still captured in her eyes. "What was that all about?" Happy weekend. His attitude amazed her, and his strength in the face of darkness gave her courage. "Done," Agnes said. "Now put away the three dollars, and let's have our lesson before my water breaks." Celestina, surprised by Lipscomb's arrival, was still mentally numb from Neddy's harangue. "Doctor, I didn't know you were coming." 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..Whereas the lone heart at the center of the rectangular white field inspired amazement and delight in her brothers and in Maria, Agnes reacted to it with dread. She strove to mask her true feelings with a smile as thin as the edge of a playing card..Tom proved to be more useful than either a cop or a priest to Pie Lady Services, when he discovered a talent for money management that protected their funds from twelve percent inflation and in fact brought them a handsome return in real terms..He carried the mug to the sink, poured the brew down the drain and saw the cooler standing in the corner. He hadn't noticed it before. A medium-size, molded-plastic, Styrofoam-lined ice chest, of the type you filled with beer and took on picnics..Halted by the unmistakable meaning of the expressions on these women's faces, Paul was grateful that Nellie was briefly stricken mute. He didn't believe he had the strength to receive the news that she had tried to deliver..He felt for the railing. Grasped at the empty air only briefly. Found the handrail. He climbed to the porch..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."..From these ominous spatters, several fibers bristled, having stuck to the pewter when the drizzle was still wet. They appeared to be human hairs..He paid cash to the locksmith, and included in the payment were the two dimes and the nickel Vanadium had left on his nightstand..Later in the month, from Sparky Vox, Junior learned the building had a four-pipe, fan-coil heating system serving discrete ductwork for each apartment. Voices couldn't carry from residence to residence in the heating-cooling system, because no apartments shared ducting. Throughout the spring, summer, and autumn of 1967, Junior met new women, bedded a few, and had no doubt that each of his conquests experienced with him something she had never known before. Yet he still suffered from an emptiness in the heart..Without sigh or complaint, he would walk back to her with the purse. The errand was no trouble. In fact, returning the purse would give him a chance to get another good-night kiss..find the detective's unlikely theory and persistent questioning to be tedious. "I seriously doubt that a dose of ipecac would produce such a violent response as in this case-not pharyngeal hemorrhage, for God's..Through fog-shrouded hills forested with oaks, maples, madrones, and pepperwoods, through magnificent stands of redwoods that towered three hundred feet, he arrived in Weott on the evening of January 3, 1968, where he stayed the night. If Paul had any northernmost goal for this trip, it was the city of Eureka, almost fifty miles farther-and for no reason, other than to eat Humboldt Bay crabs at their origin, because that was one of his and Perri's favorite foods.."You'll do better away from the ships, all the fighting and raiding. The King's working the old mines at Samory, round the mountain. There you'd be out of his way. Work for him you must, if you want to stay alive. I'll see that you're sent there. If you'll go.".. "Does my dad like Christmas?" Barty asked, sitting on the grave grass in front of the headstone..WALTER PANGLO, the only mortician in Bright Beach, was a sweet tempered wisp of a man who enjoyed puttering in his garden when he wasn't planting dead people. He grew prize roses and gave them away in great bouquets to the sick, to young people in love, to the school librarian on her birthday, to clerks who had been polite to him..could not be a person of the best intentions. Doctors and nurses wouldn't monitor their patients with the lights off.."If I had a wife, she wouldn't feel too lucky. I'm not of the persuasion that wants a wife, dear."..She sat on the end of the table, where Barty had sat, now at eye level with the standing physician.."Now you don't have to worry," Angel said, "about what happens to him if ever you're gone, Aunt Aggie. If he can do this, he can do anything, and you can rest easy.".. "That's the Oreo. After I ate it up, the cookie went smooch-smooch into my finger.".. "Why should I care whether you have any peace?" she asked, and she seemed to be listening to a woman other than herself..For the first few bites of crab in a light cornmeal crust, Nolly suspended their conversation. Bliss..Golden lamplight gilded the front windows downstairs. He would sit with Victoria on the living-room sofa, sipping wine as they got to know each other. She might tell him to call her Vicky, and maybe he'd ask her to call him Eenie, the affectionate name Naomi had given him when he wouldn't tolerate Enoch. Soon, they would be necking like two crazy kids. Junior would disrobe her on the sofa, caressing her smooth pliant body, her skin buttery in the lamplight, and then he would carry her, naked, to the dark bedroom upstairs..When her hand went limp in Celestina's, her body sagged, too, and her eyes were no longer either focused or rolling wildly. They shimmered into stillness, darkled with death, as the cardiac monitor sang the one long note that signified flatline..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..Flanking the wheelchair, Edom and Jacob spent less time watching the graveside service than studying the sky. Both brothers frowned at that cloudless blue, as though seeing thunderheads.."But nothing equals a quake for killing. Big one in Shaanxi, China, killed eight hundred thirty thousand."..After arranging to have the gallery deliver his acquisition, Junior stopped in a nearby diner for lunch. The place specialized in superb heartland food: meat loaf, fried chicken, macaroni and cheese..dent? You do believe that? Because I don't see ... I don't know how could work with someone who thought I was capable of . . .".Filled with the songs of swallows that evidently preferred these precincts to the more famous address of San Juan Capistrano, this mild March morning was perfect for pie deliveries. Agnes and Grace had produced a bakery's worth of glorious vanilla-almond pies and coffee toffee pies..Junior was at critical depth. The psychological pressure was at least five thousand pounds per square inch and growing by the second. Implosion imminent..All right, yes, it had tiny hands and tiny feet, rather than hooked talons and cloven..The galerieur's icy demeanor thawed marginally at this proof of taste and financial resources. He either smiled or grimaced at a vague but unpleasant smell-hard to tell which-and identified himself as the owner, Maxim Coquin.."September 20, 1902, Birmingham, Alabama, church fire--one hundred fifteen dead.

March 4, 1908, Collinwood, Ohio, school fire, one hundred seventy-six dead." "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?" Between the one-line description of the baklava and the menu's more effusive words about the walnut mamouls, the suspense became too much, the doubt too insidious, at which point Celestina looked up and said, with more girlish angst in her voice than she had planned "Maybe this isn't the place, maybe it isn't the time, or maybe it's the time but not the place, or the place but not the time, or maybe the time and the place are right but the weather's wrong, I don't know--Oh., While always Agnes held fast to hope, she knew that easy hope was usually false hope, and she didn't allow herself to speculate, even briefly, that his problem had resolved itself. Other symptoms-halos and rainbows-had disappeared for a time, only to return..One of the paramedics knelt beside the body, checking Naomi for a pulse, although in these circumstances, his action was such a formality that it was almost harebrained..The previous day, Jacob and Edom had driven back to Bright Beach, to prepare for Barty's arrival. Now they hurried down the back porch steps and across the lawn, as Maria followed the driveway past the house and parked near the detached garage at the rear of the deep property..Junior could neither speak nor even mewl in agony. All the saliva had been draining forward, out of his open mouth, for so long that his throat was parched and raw. He felt as though he had munched on a snack of salted razor blades that were now stuck in his pharynx. His rattling wheeze sounded like scuttling scarabs.. "Last I noticed, his car was out. Let me check." Sparky put down his phone and went to look in the garage. When he returned, he said, "Nope. Still out. When he parties, he usually parties late." 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..Leaving the engine running and the heater on, he got out of the car, leaned back inside, said, "Better lock up while I'm gone," and then closed his door.

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