

## REPORT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL FOR 2015

Excessive insurance, Agnes believed, was a temptation to fate. "A reasonable policy, yes, that's fine. But a big one ... it's like betting on death." He didn't wonder about his sanity, either, as a less self-improved man might have done. No madman strives to enhance his vocabulary or to deepen his appreciation for culture.. Jabbing his forefinger at each of the remaining treats, Barty said, "Pie, pie." If there had been footsteps, they had fallen silent the moment Junior froze to listen for them. Even over the hard drumming of his heart, he would have heard any noise. The pillowy fog seemed to smother sound in the alleyway more effectively than ever.. OF THE SEVEN NEWBORNS, none was fussing, too fresh to the world to realize how much was here to fear.. Junior said nothing. He was still upset with Naomi for hiding the pregnancy from him, but he was delighted that the baby would have been his. Now Vanadium couldn't claim that Naomi's infidelity and the resultant bastard had been the motive for murder.. So burning with anger was he that his car, by direct thermal transmission from his hands upon the wheel, should have been glowing cherry red in the January night, should have been scorching tunnels of clear dry air through the cold fog. Rancor, virulence, acrimony, vehemence: All words learned for the purpose of self-improvement were useless to him now, because none adequately conveyed the merest minimum of his anger, which swelled as vast and molten as the sun, far more formidable than his assiduously enhanced vocabulary.. In the motel office, Junior paid for another night in advance. His preference in lodgings didn't run to greasy carpeting, cigarette-scarred furniture, and the whispery scuttling of cockroaches in the dark, but though feeling better, he was too tired and shaky to drive.. This surprised him. Of course, Oregon was not the Deep South. It was a progressive state. Nevertheless, he was surprised. Oregon wasn't home to many Negroes, either, a handful compared to those in other states, and yet until now Junior supposed that they had their own cemeteries.. Through miles of worry, natural beauty, imagined omens, and the iron-red sands of Mars, they drove at last to Franklin Chan's offices in Newport Beach.. This trick, however, was far more difficult than walking where the rain wasn't. Sustaining vision took both a mental and physical toll from him.. He bought cracker sandwiches, some filled with cheese and some with peanut butter, redskin peanuts, chocolate bars, and Coca-Cola. Although this was an unhealthy meal, cheese and peanut butter and chocolate shared a virtue: they were all binding.. "So do I," said the visitor, and Junior almost frowned at this peculiar response, wondering what was meant in addition to what was merely said.. She also sought forgiveness for the hardness with which she had treated Nicholas Deed.. With no job to return to, he dawdled over lunch. He was actually tumescent with a growing sense of freedom that was as thrilling as sex.. Room by room, closet by closet, Junior conducted a search for the detective. The cop was not here.. This seemed to be a statement of great mystery and beauty, and Agnes was still contemplating it when the last of the ice melted on her tongue. Instead of more ice, sleep was spooned into her, as dark and rich as baker's chocolate.. "Don't worry, love. I'll make sure the snap's are constructed so you can get it off me easily enough." As Junior stood at Seraphim's grave, his breath smoked from him in the still night air, as though he were a dragon.. Slow deep breaths. Per Zedd, slow deep breaths. Any state of anxiety, regardless of how powerful, could be ameliorated or even dissipated.. His request felt like an assault. Agnes almost rocked backward as though struck.. "By law, adoption records are sealed and so closely guarded that you'd have an easier time acquiring a complete roster of the CIA's deep cover agents worldwide than finding this one baby." Vanadium, lending an aura of normalcy to the house. Now he wanted silence, so he would immediately hear another car in the driveway if one arrived.. He reached the end of the alleyway, stumbled into the stream of pedestrians, nearly knocked over an elderly Chinese man, turned, and discovered ... no Vanadium.. Now, here, all three on the street and vulnerable at once-the man, Celestina, the bastard boy.. The girl was creepy, no doubt about it, and Junior felt now precisely as he had felt on the night of Celestina's exhibition at the Greenbaum Gallery, when he had come out of the alleyway after disposing of Neddy Gnathic in the Dumpster and had checked his watch only to discover his bare wrist. He was missing something here, too, but it wasn't merely a Rolex, wasn't a thing at all, but an insight, a profound truth.. Before the pianist could cry out, Junior drove him between the toilet and the sink, slamming him against the wall hard enough to knock loose his breath and to cause the water to slosh audibly in the nearby toilet tank.. He didn't allow himself to ponder why Vanadium had come here or what relationship might have existed between the cop and Victoria. All that was for later consideration, after he had dealt with this unholy mess.. Lined up on the kitchen table were green-grape-and-apple pies. The thick domed crusts, with their deeply fluted edges, were the coppery gold of precious coins.. With his sister's financial backing, Edom purchased a flower shop in '71, after ascertaining that the strip mall in which it was located had been even more soundly constructed than the earthquake code required, that it didn't stand on slide-prone land, that it did not lie in a flood plain, and that in fact its altitude above sea level ensured that it would survive all but a tidal wave of such towering enormity that nothing less than an asteroid impact in the Pacific could be the cause. In '73, he married Maria Elena (that boy-girl thing, after all), whereupon she became Agnes's sister-in-law in addition to having long been a full sister in her heart. They bought the house on the other side of the original Lampion homestead, and another fence was torn down.. Pecan cakes, cinnamon custard pies boxed in insulated coolers, gifts wrapped with bright paper and glittery ribbons. Agnes Lampion made deliveries to those friends who were on her list of the needful, but also to friends who were blessed with plenty. The sight of each beloved face, each embrace, each kiss, each smile, each cheerfully spoken "Merry Christmas" at every stop fortified her heart for the sad task awaiting her when all gifts were given.. Those spike-sharp eyes, - tenpenny gray, nailed Junior to the bed, pinning him for scrutiny.. "Oh, it certainly is! It certainly is enough! But ... I don't regret much, you know. But I do regret not being here to see why you and Angel have been brought together. I know it'll be something lovely, Barty. Something so fine." 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." I'm not the first to observe that much of what quantum mechanics reveals about the nature of reality is uncannily compatible with faith, specifically with the concept of a created universe. Several fine physicists have written about this before me. As far as I am aware, however, the notion that human relationships reflect quantum mechanics is fresh with this book: Every human life is intricately connected to every other on a level as profound as the subatomic level in the physical world; underlying every apparent chaos is strange order; and "spooky effects at a distance," as the quantum-savvy put it, are as easily observed in human society as in atomic, molecular, and other physical systems. In this story, Tom Vanadium must simplify and condense complex aspects of quantum mechanics into a few sentences in a single chapter, because although he isn't aware that he's a fictional character, he is obliged to be entertaining. I hope that any physicists reading this will have mercy on him.. "Shape-taking?". 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.. Not understanding, thinking that he was inexplicably asking if she loved him, she said, "Yes, of course, you silly bear, you stupid man, of course, I love you." 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.. Junior assumed the dead girl had come from a family of stature in the Negro community, which would explain the stonemason's accelerated service. Vanadium, according to his own words, was a friend of the family; consequently, the father was most likely a police officer.. So the practice of their lore and the teaching of it had become perilous. Those who undertook it were often those already outcast, crippled, deranged, without family, old-women and men who had little to lose. The wise man and wise woman, trusted and held in reverence, gave way to the stock figures of the shuffling, impotent village sorcerer with his trickeries, the hag-witch with her potions used in aid of lust, jealousy, and malice. And a child's gift for magic became a thing to dread and hide.. Sliding Victoria's chair away from the table, he turned her to face him. He adjusted her body so that her head was tipped back and her arms were hanging slack at her sides.. Koko changed directions with a fantastic pivot turn and bounded after the girl.. 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.. He lay still, waiting for silence to return, so he could hear whether the great gong had drawn people into the alley.. 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.. Perhaps she was afflicted with only expressive aphasia, but she must be confused to some degree. The baby, which would be placed for adoption, was not hers to name.. As though giving voice to her worst fear had made it come true, Agnes was seized by a contraction so painful that she cried out and clutched the paramedic's hands tightly enough to make him wince. She felt a peculiar swelling within, then an awful looseness, pressure followed at once by release.. Barty, at the head of the table, sensed Mary's approach only as she was about to touch him. She put a hand on his arm and said, "Daddy, will you turn your chair away from the table and let me sit on your lap?". In August, he developed an interest in meditation. He began with concentrative meditation-the form called meditation "with seed"--in which you must close your eyes, mentally focus on a visualized object, and clear your mind of all else.. Before he taught himself to read books, he also taught himself numbers, and then how to read a clock. The significance of time had a more profound impact on him than Agnes could understand, perhaps because acquiring an awareness of the infinite nature of the universe and the finite nature of each human life-and fully understanding the implications of this knowledge-takes most of us till early adulthood if not later, whereas for Barty, the vast glories of the universe and the comparatively humble nature of human existence were recognized, contemplated, and absorbed in a matter of weeks.. Chastened by these recent events, he vowed to stop meditating, to void all passive responses to the challenges of life. He must explore the unknown rather than flinch from it in fear. Besides, through his explorations, he would prove that the unknown was all just tapioca or applesauce, or whatever.. His apartment, over the large garage, was reached by a set of exterior stairs. The space was divided into two rooms. The first was a combination living room and kitchenette, with a corner dining table seating two. Beyond was a small bedroom with adjoining bath.. An SFPD patrol car swept past, its siren silent, the rack of emergency beacons flashing on its roof.. In her campaign to keep her weight gain to a minimum, anorexia was her ally. She learned to find pleasure in hunger pangs.. "Naomi, are you in there?" Junior whispered again, peering into the windows of the girl's soul.. She looked surprised, all right, but her expression wasn't the one that Junior had painted on the canvas of his imagination. Her surprise had no delight in it, and she didn't at once break into a radiant smile.. Wally Lipscomb parked in his garage, switched off the engine, and started to get out of the Buick before he saw that Celestina had left her purse in the car.. Maria, puzzled but cooperative, left the room as instructed, and Barty removed the correct book from the stack on the table, without anyone's guidance. He sat in the armchair at his mother's side and began to read.. The odds against this phenomenal eleven-card draw must be millions to one, which seemed to give the predictions validity.. The spectral singer didn't exhibit her blood-and-bone sisters' reluctance to pursue her man.. Raised by a father to whom

any form of amusement was blasphemy, Agnes had never seen a magician perform until she was nineteen, when Joey Lampion, then her suitor, had taken her to a stage show. Rabbits plucked out of top hats, doves conjured from sudden plumes of smoke, assistants sawn in half and mended to walk again; every illusion that had been old even in Houdini's time was a jaw-dropping amazement to her that evening. Now she remembered a trick in which the magician had poured a pitcher of milk into a funnel fashioned from a few pages of a newspaper, causing the milk to vanish when the funnel, still dry, was unrolled to reveal ordinary newsprint. The thrill that had quivered through her that evening measured I on the Richter scale compared to the full 10-point sense of wonder quaking through her at the sight of Barty as dry as if he'd spent the afternoon perched fireside. In her features, the girl entirely resembled her mother. She was nothing whatsoever like Junior. Only the light brown shade of her skin provided evidence that she hadn't been derived from Seraphim by parthenogenesis. The Benediction service had concluded, and the worshipers had departed. Gone, too, were the priest and the altar boys. body on the flight out of San Francisco. When finally her obligations were met, she. The blocking dresser, which doubled as a vanity, was surmounted by a mirror. One bullet drilled through the plywood backing, made a spider-web puzzle of the silvered glass, lodged in the wall above the bed-thwack-and kicked out a spray of plaster chips. Returning his attention to his own shoes, Jacob said, "So ... what am I supposed to do about this?". More than twice, worried nurses-and even a resident internist braved the tumult to check on Junior's condition. They asked if he really felt up to entertaining visitors, these visitors. She couldn't explain her anxiety to him, because he believed in the supremacy of laws, in the justice that might be delivered in this life, in a comparatively simple reality, and he would not comprehend the gloriously, frighteningly, reassuringly, strangely, and deeply complex reality Agnes occasionally perceived-usually peripherally, sometimes intellectually, but often with her heart. This was a world in which effect could come before cause, in which what seemed to be coincidence was, in fact, merely the visible part of a far larger pattern that couldn't be seen whole. At the front, a soft spotlight focused on the life-size crucifix. The only additional illumination came from the small bulbs over the stations of the cross, along both side walls, and from the flickering flames in the ruby glass containers on the votive-candle rack. "It's even worse," Junior rasped, convinced that he was losing some indefinable advantage if the cop left without playing out this moment as it would usually unfold in an intellectual television crime drama like Perry Mason or Peter Gunn. "Wouldn't dream of asking you to make it a habit. Just this one time. If anguish, why not guilt?". Rising slowly like the blade in the hands of an ax murderer as deliberate as an accountant, Thomas Vanadium's gaze arced from Junior's clenched fist to his face. Maria's face gathered into a frown, like a piece of brown cloth cinched by a series of whipstitches. "Six lessons." Then he closed his eyes, held the revolver in both hands, and at point-blank range, he shot the dead woman twice. Abruptly, Junior Cain turned away from the tower, from the body of his lost love, dropped to his knees, and vomited. Vomited more explosively than he had ever done in the depths of the worst sickness of his life. Bitter, thick, grossly out of proportion to the simple lunch that he had eaten, up came a dreadfully reeking vomitus. He was untroubled by nausea, but his abdominal muscles contracted painfully, so tightly that he thought he would be cinched in two, and up came more, and still more, spasm after spasm, until he spewed a thin gruel green with bile, which surely had to be the last of it, but was not, for here was more bile, so acidic that his gums burned from contact with it--Oh God, please no--still more. His entire body heaving. Choking as he aspirated a piece of something vile. He squeezed his watering eyes shut against the sight of the flood, but he could not block out the stench. He shouldered past two counter waitresses, past the short-order cook who was working eggs and burgers and bacon on the open griddle and grill. Whatever expression wrenched Junior's face, it must have been intimidating, for without protest but with walled alarm, the employees squeezed aside to let him pass. Even as this news pleased Junior, it also saddened him. He was not merely interring a lovely wife, but also his first child. He was burying his family. Surprising himself more than anyone, Edom also presented his collection to the university. Out with tornadoes, hurricanes, tidal waves, earthquakes, and volcanoes; bring in the roses. He lightly renovated his small apartment, painted it in brighter colors, and throughout the autumn, he stocked his bookshelves with volumes on horticulture, excitedly planning a substantial expansion of the rosarium come spring. Ford dealership, which he'd closed for business until three o'clock: lamentations, lunch, and moving reminiscences of the deceased shared among the shiny new Thunderbirds, Galaxies, and Mustangs. That venue would provide Junior with the witnesses he required for his reluctant, tearful, and perhaps even angry concession to the Hackachaks' insistent materialism. He smiled ruefully. "Might be ready for a wedding by then, but not a honeymoon." The weather was good, so he went for a walk, though he crossed the street repeatedly to avoid passing newspaper-vending machines. Playing with fire was fun when you didn't have to attempt to conceal the fact that it was arson. He did not answer Hound's question. After a while, a voice broke the vacuum-perfect silence. Bob Chicane. His instructor. One moment, girl and yellow vinyl ball. The next moment, gone as if they'd never been. "There is no king in Earthsea," the young man said, stern and righteous, "In my master's service, then," Hound amended, patient. The two men detached and rolled up the pleated green skirt that hung from the rectangular frame of the graveyard winch on which the casket was suspended. Green, rather than black, because Naomi loved nature: Junior had been thoughtful about the details of the service. If not for Celestina's slutty little sister, Bartholomew would not exist. No threat. Junior's life would be different, better. get his hackles up if we, at the state level, still want to poke around a little. A dumpster and a dead musician had humbled him as thoroughly as he had ever been humbled before, as completely as violent nervous emesis and volcanic diarrhea had humbled him, and he had no tolerance for being humbled. Humility is for losers. Slowly rotating his raised hands before his eyes, as if he saw them young and supple-fingered, the magician described the amazing manipulations that a master card mechanic could perform. Though he spoke without flash or filigree, he made these feats of skill sound more sorcerous than hares from hats, doves from scarves, and blondes bisected by buzz saws. Her

strength was the strength of stones only in the sense that she felt as immovable as rock, yet she found the resources to raise one arm, to place her left hand over Maria's bead-tangled fingers. "But the baby's dead." Kitchen staff. All men. Some looked up in surprise; others were oblivious of him. He stalked the cramped work aisles, eyes watering from the fragrant steam and the heat, seeking Vanadium, an answer.. "I'm wondering," Nolly said, "if you're not an officer of the law anymore, in what capacity are you going to pursue Cain?". At eight o'clock in the evening, Junior parked two blocks past the target house. He walked back to the Prosser residence, gloved hands in the pockets of his raincoat, collar turned up.. The physician saw the look and understood it. A blush pinked his long, pale face. "Celestina, you're quite beautiful, and I'm sure you've learned to be wary of men, but I swear that my intentions are entirely honorable." Jacob had spent most of two days baking Barty's favorite pies, cakes, and cookies, and he'd prepared a meal as well. Maria's girls were at her sister's place this evening, so she stayed for dinner. Edom poured wine for everyone but Barty, root beer for the guest of honor, and while this couldn't be called a celebration, Agnes's spirits were lifted by a sense of normality, of hope, of family.. And so at the age of thirty-one, after more than twenty-eight years of blindness with a few short reprieves, Barty Lampion received the gift of sight from his ten-year-old daughter. 1996 through 2000: Day after day, the work was done in memory of Agnes Lampion, Joey Lampion, Harrison White, Seraphim White, Jacob Isaacson, Simon Magusson, Tom Vanadium, Grace White, and most recently Wally Lipscomb, in memory of all those who had given so much and, though perhaps still alive in other places, were gone from here.. All the way to the nightstand, he expected to discover that the revolver had been taken from the drawer. Yet here it was. Loaded.. He realized that like so many women, Seraphim wanted it, asked for it-yet had no place in her self-image to accommodate the truth that she was sexually aggressive. She wanted to think of herself as shy, demure, virginal, as innocent as a minister's daughter ought to be which meant that to get what she wanted, she required Junior to be a brute. He was happy to oblige.. She shook her head. "No way back." She pointed to the sketch pad on the floor. "I pushed him there." Maybes were for babies, but Caesar Zedd had failed to provide a profundity with which Junior could ward off the what-ifs as easily as the maybes.. Sitting on the edge of the bed, taking his hand, she stared at his sweet little bow of a mouth, whereas before she would have met his eyes. "Tell me." He woke at noon, eyes gummed shut with the effluence of sleep. He felt lousy, but he was in control of himself-and strong enough to fetch his suitcase, which he'd been unable to carry upon arrival.. Her fear, Agnes suddenly realized, arose from her father's often expressed conviction that an attempt to excel at anything was a sin that would one day be grievously punished. All forms of amusement were sinful, by his way of thinking, and all those who sought even the simplest entertainment were lost souls; however, those who desired to amuse others were the worse sinners, because they were overflowing with pride, striving to shine, eager to make themselves into false gods, to be praised and adored as only God should be adored. Actors, musicians, singers, novelists were doomed to hell by the very acts of creation which, in their egomania, they saw as the equal of their Creator's work. Striving to excel at anything, in fact, was a sign of corruption in the soul, whether one wanted to be recognized as a superior carpenter or car mechanic, or a grower of prize roses. Talent, in her father's view, was not a gift from God, but from the devil, meant to distract us from prayer, penitence, and duty.. Reaching between the slats, Agnes tickled the pink piggies on his left foot. "Toes." Currently, Jacob was far removed from the embalming chamber and intended never to set foot there, alive. With Walter Panglo as his guide, he toured the casket selection in the funeral-planning room.. "Who is this?" he demanded, although for a demand, the words came out too thin, too squeaky.. voice was flat, a drone; he had delivered not an emotional threat, but a quiet promise.. The gray pewter appeared to be mottled with a black substance. Perhaps char. As though it had been soiled in a fire.. He hadn't heard the cop get out of the chair and cross the dark room. Difficult draftsman? Having never been nudged in that direction, would Cain have followed a different path that took him far from Celestina and Angel?. From the public hallway on the ground level, stairs led to the upper three floors. He would be able to hear anyone descending long before they arrived.. Nolly was, as usual, "Nolly" to everyone, but here Kathleen was "Mrs. Wulfstan." Turning his patched eyes in the general direction of his mother, Barty said, "Oops." "What aren't you telling us?" her mother pressed, intuiting the existence of a larger story, if not the amazing nature of it.. Three minutes by car, maybe two without stop signs. He could just about run it as fast as drive it. He had a bit of a gut on him. He wasn't the man he used to be. Ironically, however, after the coma and the rehab, he wasn't as heavy as he had been before Cain sunk him in Quarry Lake.. "Sure they do," said Wally as he unlocked the two deadbolts. "But you gotta be twenty-one years old to get a license for one." 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.. The narrow brick-paved serviceway lay five feet below. The maniac had knocked over trash cans while making his escape, but he wasn't tumbled among the rest of the garbage.. To his surprise, when Naomi expressed an interest in romance, Junior was a bull again. He would have thought he had left his best stuff at Reverend Harrison White's parsonage.. Edom removed two of the pies from the table and put them on the counter near the ovens.. He had not heard the lawman rising up with malevolent intent, as he had imagined. The body had simply rolled off the backseat onto the floor during the too-sharp 180-degree turn.. 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.. For her, the suspense that grew throughout dinner didn't have much to do with whether or not Wally would pop the question, because if he didn't broach the subject this time, she intended to take the initiative. Instead, Celestina was more tense about whether or not Wally expected that a heartfelt expression of commitment should be sufficient to induce her to sleep with him.. Koko skidded to a halt, perplexed, looked left, looked right, floppy ears lifted slightly to catch any sound of Mistress Mary.. 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..just as the smile curved to completion, however, an awful thing happened. The humiliation began with a loud gurgle in his gut..On the day that Vanadium attended the graveside service for Seraphim and subsequently stopped at Naomi's grave to needle Cain, he had suspected that Phimie didn't die in a traffic accident, as claimed, but he hadn't for a moment thought that the wife killer was in any way connected. Now, finding this gallery brochure in the nightstand drawer seemed to be one more bit of circumstantial proof of Cain's guilt.."The doctors," he continued, "needed to repair damage to the left frontal sinus, the sphenoidal sinus, and the sinus cavernous, which had all been partially crushed by that pewter candlestick. Frontal, malar, ethmoid, maxillary, sphenoid, and palatine bones had to be rebuilt to properly contain my right eye, because it sort of ... well, it dangled. That was just for starters, and there was considerable essential dental work, as well. I elected not to have any cosmetic surgery."..No longer able to judge the boy's degree of sleepiness by his eyes, she relied on him to tell her when to stop reading. At his request, she closed the book after forty-seven pages, at the end of Chapter 2..Her brothers' solemnity irritated Agnes. They appeared to be taking this reading seriously, as though it were far more than just a little after-dinner entertainment..too quiet and too patient to be the living-dead incarnation of a murdered wife. This was a predatory silence, an animal cunning, not a supernatural hush. This was the elegant stillness of a panther in the brush,."He's crafty, you say. Can you use him?""Forget Barty's tree for a second and imagine that all these many worlds are like stacked slices of Swiss cheese. Through some holes, you can see only the next slice. Through others, you see through two or three or five slices before holes stop overlapping. There are little holes between stacked worlds, too, but they're constantly shifting, changing, second by second. And I can't see them, really, but I have an uncanny feel for them. Watch closely."..After nudging the door shut with his shoulder, Barty carried the sodas out of the kitchen and forward along the hall. Pausing at the livingroom archway, he said, "Uncle Jacob?".Carrying him to the window, gazing up at the stars, the moon, she said, "I'll always read to you, Barty."

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