

CHANCE ENCOUNTERS

As home tours went, this one was notably less interesting than most. The accountant appeared to have no secret life, no perverse interests that he hid from the world. "You look as if you've seen a ghost," said Vinnie, and Agnes wished the threat were as simple as a restless spirit, groaning and rattling its chains, like Dickens's Marley come to Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve. She got a can of soda, returned to the table, and sat down as if finished with her explorations. "You're okay, Barty." Suitcases seemed to be missing. Some clothes, as well. Could mean a weekend vacation. Not once did he look back to see if the fire had grown visible as a glow against the night sky. The events at Victoria's were part of the past. He was finished with all that. Junior was a forward-thinking, future-oriented man. He added verisimilitude to his threats by concluding with a few hard punches where they wouldn't show, in her breasts and belly, and then he, went home to Naomi, to whom he'd been married, at that time, less than five months. They lived too far from the nearest railroad tracks. He could not rationally expect a derailed train to crash through the garage. Too late for interrogation now, with Vanadium bludgeoned into eternal sleep and resting under many fathoms of cold bedding. Jolene started to refill his coffee mug-then thought better of it. "Maybe you don't need more caffeine, Edom." When Agnes pressed for a diagnosis, Dr. Chan quietly pleaded the need to gather more information. After Barty had seen the oncologist and had additional tests, he and his mother would return here in the afternoon to receive a diagnosis and counseling in treatment options. 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. Upon arriving at the creche window, he had been in a buoyant mood. As he studied the quiet scene, however, he grew uneasy. Angel, busy with a cookie through most of this, licked crumbs from her lips and asked Paul, "Do you have a puppy?" She thought of herself as a creative person, a capable and efficient and committed person, but she did not think of herself as a strong person. Yet she would need great strength for what lay ahead. Briefly, Junior felt humiliated. He wanted to drag the detective out of the car and stomp on his smug, dead face. 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." Tom removed the lid. No beer, one head. Simon Magusson's severed head lay faceup on the ice, mouth open as though he were standing in court to object to the prosecution's line of questioning. He was wrong about this. On the final Friday of every month, in sunshine and in rain, Junior routinely took a walking tour of the six galleries that were his very favorites, browsing leisurely in each and chatting up the galerieurs, with a one-o'clock break for lunch at the St. Francis Hotel. This was a tradition with him, and invariably at the end of each such day, he felt wonderfully cozy. And when she finally looked directly at him, blinked at him, her lashes flicking off a spray of fine droplets, Agnes saw that Barty was dry. Not a single jewel of rain glimmered in his thick dark hair or on the baby-smooth planes of his face. His shirt and sweater were as dry as if they had just been taken off a hanger and from a dresser drawer. A few drops darkened the legs of the boy's khaki pants--but Agnes realized this was water that had dripped from her arm as she'd reached across him to adjust the vent. Eventually, of course, dear Edom held forth about tornadoes--in particular the infamous Tri-State Tornado of 1925, which ravaged portions of Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. Edom and Jacob came to dinner with Agnes every evening. And though the past weighed heavily on them when they were under this roof, without fail they stayed long enough to wash the dishes before fleeing back to their apartments over the garage. He was filled with bitter remorse for having suspected Naomi of poisoning his cheese sandwich or his apricots. She had in fact adored him, as he had always believed. She would never have lifted a hand against him, never. Dear Naomi would have died for him. In fact, she had. Vanadium's vehicle, obviously not an official police sedan, was a blue 1961 Studebaker Lark Regal. A dumpy and inelegant car, it looked as though it had been designed specifically to complement the stocky detective's physique. Fascinated by this strange new realm, Angel returned to her chair periodically, between explorations, to sip apple juice and to reveal her latest discoveries: "They got yellow shelf paper. They got potatoes in a drawer. They got four kinds of pickles in the refrigerator. They got a toaster under a sock with pictures of birds on it." Since discovering the quarter in his cheeseburger, Junior had been half convinced that the maniac cop survived the bludgeoning. In spite of his grievous wounds, perhaps Vanadium had swum up through a hundred feet of murky water, barely avoiding being drowned. quiet pool, sweet with the fragrance of jasmine. Under the huge spreading oak. Grass oiled to a glossy green by the. During the first months, the journeys were eight or ten miles: along the shoreline north and south of Bright Beach, and inland to the desert beyond the hills. He left home and returned the same day. Junior would have liked to pursue spiritual matters with Sklent, but numerous other partyers wanted their time with the great man. In parting, sure that he would give the artist a laugh, Junior withdrew the brochure for "This Momentous Day" from his jacket and coyly asked for an opinion of Celestina White's paintings. At eleven o'clock Saturday morning, having just settled in the hotel after arriving from St. Mary's, they were waiting for the SFPD to deliver suitcases of clothes and toiletries that Rena Moller, Celestina's neighbor, had packed according to her instructions. While waiting, the three of them took an early lunch-or a late breakfast-at a room service table in the living room. "I want you to adopt the baby." Before they could react, she hurried on: "I won't be twenty-one for four months yet, and even then they might give me trouble about adopting, even though I'm her aunt, because I'm single. But if you adopt her, I'll raise her. I promise I will. I'll take full responsibility. You don't have to worry that I'll regret it or that I'll ever want to drop her in your laps and escape the responsibility. She'll have to be the center of my life from here on. I understand that. I accept it. I embrace it." He produced her coat as if by legerdemain. Magically, she found her arms in the sleeves and the collar around her neck, though given her size lately, putting on anything other than a hat usually required strategy and persistence. "so she's married," Junior said,

figuring that maybe Celestina wasn't his heart mate, after all..Then quickly from Spruce Hills to Eugene by car, from Eugene to Orange County Airport by a chartered aircraft, from Orange County to Bright Beach in a stolen '68 Oldsmobile 4-4-2 Hurst, while the advantage of surprise remained with him. Carrying a newly acquired, silencer-fitted 9-mm pistol, spare magazines of ammunition, three sharp knives, a police lock-release gun, and one piece of steaming luggage, Junior had arrived late the previous evening..Zedd endorses self-pity, but only if you learn to use it as a springboard to anger, because anger-like hatred--can be a healthy emotion when properly channeled. Anger can motivate you to heights of achievement you otherwise would never know, even just the simple furious determination to prove wrong the bastards who mocked you, to rub their faces in the fact of your success. Anger and hatred have driven all great political leaders, from Hider to Stalin to Mao, who wrote their names indelibly across the face of history, and who were--each, in his own way--eaten with self-pity when young.. "No," Agnes said, shaking loose the grip of irrational fear. "Wait. This is absurd. It's just a card. And we're all curious."..He must be careful in his approach to her. He dared not rush into this. Think it through. Devise a strategy. This valuable opportunity must not be wasted..Captivated by catastrophe, so lost in his book that he might as well have stepped magically inside of it and closed the covers after himself, Uncle Jacob didn't answer.. "You sounded as though you were in a lot of distress. You were frightened of this Bartholomew."..Calcimine moonlight cast an arctic illusion over the boneyard. The grass was as eerily silver as snow at night, and gravestones tilted like pressure ridges of ice in a fractured wasteland..Licky took him down into the mines to show him the gangues, the kinds of earth the ore was likely to occur in. A few miners were working at the end of a long level..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..Yet the coin was as real as dead Naomi broken on the stony ridge at the foot of the fire tower..The disease hadn't corrupted her heart, and it had left her face untouched, as well. Lovely, she was, as she had always been..This was better than taking slow deep breaths. Periodically, on the way to Vanadium's house, Junior spat out a string of insults, punctuated by obscenities..That evening, he was filled with a greater sense of adventure than he'd felt since arriving in the city from Oregon. Consequently, he treated himself to three glasses of a superb Bordeaux and a filet mignon in the same elegant hotel lounge where he had dined on his first night in San Francisco, almost three years earlier..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..Yet, with no recollection of rising from his chair, he found that he had shouldered his backpack and crossed the room. The three men looked up expectantly..A moment later, in the corridor, as Nolly locked the door to his suite, Kathleen linked her right arm through Vanadium's left. "Do I call you Detective Vanadium, Brother, or Father?"..Curious to know what Neddy had said, Junior quickly approached the same gallery staffer. "Excuse me, but I've been looking for my friend ever so long in this mob, and then I saw him talking to you--the gentleman in the London Fog and the tux--and now I've lost him again. He didn't say if he was leaving, did he? He's my ride home."..Trembling, she sat beside the bassinet and gazed at her baby with such love that the force of it ought to have rocked him awake..At home again, in the safety of the family, Barty collapsed in exhaustion from the sustained effort to see with eyes that he didn't possess. Abed for ten days, feverish, afflicted with vertigo and migraine headaches, nauseated, he lost eight pounds before his recovery was complete..With a paper towel, Junior wiped the revolver. He dropped it on the floor beside the riddled nurse..use it. The cop was no threat to the English army, as Joan had been, but as far as Junior was concerned, the creep most definitely deserved to be burned at the stake..Maybe every accidental death was suspicious to Vanadium. His obsessive hounding of Junior might be his standard operating procedure..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..He got everything he ordered--full value, and more. When he lifted off the top of the bun to squeeze mustard onto the burger, he discovered a shiny quarter pressed into the half-melted cheese..The second medic wheeled the gurney to the rear of the van, calling for one of the policemen to accompany him to the hospital. Apparently, he needed help if he was to deliver the baby and also stabilize Apes while en route..All the way back to the ridge, sitting up front beside a county deputy in a police cruiser, with an ambulance and other patrol cars racing close behind them, Junior had shaken uncontrollably. When he tried to respond to the officer's questions, his uncharacteristically thin voice cracked more often than not, and he was able to croak only, "Jesus, dear Jesus," over and over..Looking down at Barty, Agnes saw the ghost of Joey in the baby's face, and although she half believed that her husband would be alive now if he had never tempted fate by putting such a high price on his wife, she couldn't find any anger in her heart for him. She must accept this final generosity with grace--if also without enthusiasm..Usually, he remained still, tense, listening, until enough silence convinced him that the sounds he'd heard had been in the dream, not in the real world. If silence didn't settle him, he went into the living room, only to discover that she was always where he had left her, fork-and-fan-blade face wrenched in a soundless scream..Her hands shook, her entire body shook, and in her mind was a hard clatter of fear like the wheels of a roller coaster rattling over poorly seamed tracks.. "And you give yourself far too little credit," Salk continued gently. "There's no doubt in my mind that Perri was a hero. But she was married to a hero, as well."..On a morning in July, Junior was visiting the public library, poring through the stacks in search of exotic volumes on the occult, when the phantom voice rose nearby. Here, the singing sounded softer than in his apartment, little more than a murmur, and also

threadier.. "That won't do it." The vending machines were designed to accept quarters, not to eject them. They didn't make change. Mechanically, this barrage wasn't possible.. As red as Angel had been for her evening outing, she was that yellow for retirement to bed in her own home. Two-piece yellow jersey pajamas. Yellow socks. At the girl's request, Celestina had tied a soft yellow bow in her mass of springy hair.. He swept the immediate area with the flashlight, and shadows spun with shadows, waltzing spirits in the ballroom of the night.. Aware of the mortician's new edginess, Jacob was convinced that his initial distrust of Panglo was justified. This twitchy little guy seemed to have something to hide. Jacob didn't have to be a cop to recognize nervousness born of guilt.. As to the distressing matter of Seraphim's daughter, Junior at first decided to return to San Francisco to torture the truth out of Nolly Wulfstan. Then he realized that he'd been referred to Wulfstan by the same man who had told him that Thomas Vanadium was missing and was believed to be Victoria Bressler's killer.. As she clambered through the open door into Celestina's lap, the girl said, "Uncle Wally gave me an Oreo." In the face of his kindness, however, she couldn't refuse his request. She nodded.. Grace declined food, but Tom ordered for her, anyway, selecting those things that by now he knew Celestina liked, guessing that the mother's taste had shaped the daughter's.. The high point of his day was coming home to Perri. They met when they were thirteen, married at twenty-two. In May they would celebrate their twenty-third anniversary.. The boy's silvery giggles rang as merrily as sleigh bells, his Christmas spirit undampened. "Not between, Mommy. Nobody could do that. I just ran where the rain wasn't." -and when I get up off the street, my clothes are a mess, and I've got this face." This wasn't a new sensation. He had experienced it before. In the night just passed, when he awakened from an unremembered dream and saw the bright quarter dancing across Vanadium's knuckles.. The longer he crouched, head cocked, breathing silently through his open mouth, the more convinced Junior became that he had heard a man approaching. Indeed, the terrible conviction grew that someone was standing immediately in front of the dumpster, head cocked, also breathing through his open mouth, listening for Junior even as Junior listened for him.. "Tame him or bury him," said Losen, and turned to more important matters.. He didn't want to lean inside and peer over the front seat. He had no weapon. He would be unbalanced, vulnerable.. "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." Standing over the body, he squeezed off the last three shots. Finished, he detested guns more than ever.. Although he was seventy-six, Tom still worked for Pie Lady Services. They had no set retirement age for staff, and Father Tom expected to die at his work. "And if it's a pie-caravan day, just leave my old carcass where I drop until you make all the deliveries. I won't be responsible for anyone missing a promised pie." "And how about this," he continued. "Every point in the universe is directly connected to every other point, regardless of distance, so any point on Mars is, in some mysterious way, as close to me as is any of you. Which means it's possible for information-and objects, even people-to move instantly between here and London without wires or microwave transmission. In fact, between here and a distant star, instantly. We just haven't figured out how to make it happen. Indeed, on a deep structural level, every point in the universe is the same point. This interconnectedness is so complete that a great flock of birds taking flight in Tokyo, disturbing the air with their wings, contributes to weather changes in Chicago." The cheerful tides of friends and neighbors, over the years, had washed away nearly all the stains that the dark rage of Agnes's father had impressed on these rooms. She hoped her brothers might eventually see that hatred and anger are only scars upon a beach, while love is the rolling surf that ceaselessly smooths the sand.. He loved Naomi, of course, and never could deny her. Although he had been especially sweet to her that night, if he had known that they would have less than a year together before fate tore her from him, he might have been even sweeter.. Her life was so blessed that she could have dealt with a horde of locusts, let alone a few mosquitoes.. In his entire life, Junior had never suffered this much pain without first having killed someone. Reluctant to depart until certain that his student was out of danger physically, emotionally, and mentally, Bob Chicane stayed until three thirty. When he left, he broke some bad news to Junior: "I can't keep you on my student list, man. I'm sorry, but you're way too intense for me. Way too intense. Everything you do. All the women you run through, this whole art thing, whatever all those phone books are about-now even meditation. Way too intense for me, too obsessive. Sorry. Have a good life, man." He pushed back the bedclothes and sat up, leaning against the pillows and headboard. "This is maybe a hard thing for you to do, but it's really important." By the first of November, they moved his mother's bed into the living room, so she could be in the center of things, where always she had been, though they admitted no guests now, only members of their family with its many names.. She snatched the handset away from Angel, told Bellini, "He's here," threw the phone on the bed, told Angel, "Stay close to me," ran to the windows, and jerked the drapes out of the way.. This venerable old building, as solidly constructed as a castle, was well-insulated; noises in other apartments rarely penetrated to Junior's. Never before had he heard a neighbor's voice distinctly enough to comprehend the words spoken-or, in this case, sung.. Wally had disposed of his properties in San Francisco under Tom's careful supervision. Any attempt to trace him from the city to Bright Beach would fail. His vehicles were purchased through a corporation, and his new house had been bought through a trust named after his late wife.. "Maybe it's not where the heart is," Wally corrected himself. "Maybe it's where the buffalo roam." Too much clatter, drawing attention. No leisure for romance now, no chance for a two-sister score. just kill Celestina, kill Bartholomew, and go, go.. Edom removed two of the pies from the table and put them on the counter near the ovens.. Ichabod passed Bartholomew through the open door to Celestina in the passenger's seat, went around the Buick, put the tote bag in the back, and climbed behind the wheel once more.. Embarrassed, Kathleen stopped singing, but to the other woman, Nolly said, "It is a lovely voice, isn't it? Haunting, I think." Junior had almost fumbled his fork when he recognized the tune. His heart raced. His hands were suddenly clammy.. According to Helen, more than half the paintings had been sold by the close of the reception, a record for the gallery. With the exhibition scheduled to run two fall

weeks, she was confident that they would enjoy a sellout or the next thing to it. "This is Detective Bellini, with the San Francisco Police Department. Is everything all right there?" Finally he began: Greetings on this momentous day. I'm writing to you about an exceptional woman, Agnes Lampion, whose life you have touched without knowing, and whose story may interest you. The boy never mentioned what he'd done, and his mother ceased worrying about him falling out of bed. So much argued against the idea that they could succeed as a couple. In this age when race supposedly didn't matter anymore, it sometimes seemed to matter more year by year. Age mattered, too, and at fifty, he was twenty-six years older than she was, old enough to be her father, as surely her father would quietly but pointedly--and repeatedly!--observe. He was highly educated, with multiple medical degrees, and she had gone to art school. 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. Agnes was able to respond, Paul sprang up and moved away. Other friends knelt and crouched and bent to her, and she lost sight of the pharmacist as he moved off through the dispersing crowd. "You'll need time to ... adjust to this," he said. "Perhaps you've got to call family. . . ." "I don't like the old crazy doctor," she said, still drawing. "I wish it was about bunnies on vacation--or maybe a toad learns to drive a car and has adventures." Worried that tears would frighten Barty, that indulging in a few would result in a ruinous flood, Agnes held back the salt tides. A mother's duty proved to be the stuff from which dams were built. Perri was often fast asleep by nine-thirty, seldom later than ten o'clock while Paul never turned in earlier than midnight or one in the morning. In the later hours, to the reassuring susurration of his wife's breathing, he returned to his pulp adventures. Setting out after dark, Paul had walked south, following the coastal highway. He was accompanied by the windy rush of passing traffic, but later only by the occasional cry of a blue heron, the whisper of a salty breeze in the shore grass, and the murmur of the surf. Without pushing himself too hard, he reached La Jolla by dawn. Agnes got out of bed, switched on the lamp, and tucked Barty in once more. "Say your silent prayers." He didn't even dare to pretend to wake up now, with a mutter and a yawn because the detective would know that he was faking, that he had been awake all along. And if he'd been feigning unconsciousness, eaves. 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. The masterpiece that Junior purchased was small, a sixteen-inch-square canvas, but it cost twenty-seven hundred dollars. The entire picture--titled *The Cancer Lurks Unseen, Version 1*--was flat black, except for a small gnarled mass, bile-green and pus-yellow, in the upper-right quadrant. Worth every penny. She was not yet twenty-one, and he was at least twice her age, but he leaned like a small child against her, and like a mother she comforted him. The opening paragraph still lingered in his memory, because he had crafted it with great care: Greetings on this momentous day. I'm writing to you about an exceptional woman, Agnes Lampion, whose life you have touched without knowing, and whose story may interest you. Startled, Celestina said, "Good grief, you're spooky. How could you know what I'm thinking?" Commodified fantasy takes no risks: it invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth-telling to sentimental platitude. Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits. Profoundly disturbing moral choices are sanitized, made cute, made safe. The passionately conceived ideas of the great story-tellers are copied, stereotyped, reduced to toys, molded in bright-colored plastic, advertised, sold, broken, junked, replaceable, interchangeable. He was a man with a plan, focused, committed, ready to act and then think, as soon as he was able to act. A spasm of pain weakened his hand. Cartridges slipped through his fingers, fell to the floor. Dinner arrived, and Tom persuaded Celestina and Grace to come to the table for Angel's sake, even if they had no appetite. After so much chaos and confusion, the child needed stability and routine wherever they could be provided. Nothing brought a sense of order and normality to a disordered and distressing day more surely than the gathering of family and friends around a dinner table. Averting his eyes from Vanadium's face, Junior moved farther up the stocky body. He folded back the tweed sports jacket to reveal a shoulder holster. His enjoyment of the art was diminished by these associations, and as Junior turned away from *Industrial Woman*, his attention was suddenly captured by the quarters. Three lay on the floor at her gear wheel-and-meat-cleaver feet. They had not been here earlier. Maria set aside two cards before turning another faceup. This was also an ace of hearts. 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. Maria, however, lived comfortably with both the Catholicism and the occultism in which she had been raised. In Hermosillo, Mexico, the latter had been nearly as important to the spiritual life of her family as had been the former. The room was bright enough for him to confirm that he was alone. The interior of the box in which Naomi now resided could be no more silent than this house. "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*. "Soon as Cain is out of sight, we yank up our tricky vending machines, then haul the real ones out of the van and bolt 'em down again. Slick, fast. People are still picking up quarters when we finish. And get this--they want to know where the camera is." This guy was spooky. Junior was beginning to think that the detective's unorthodox behavior wasn't a carefully crafted strategy, as it had first seemed, but that Vanadium was a little wacky. Junior was impressed and delighted by her clever assumption of it strictly professional voice and demeanor, which convincingly masked her intense desire. Sweet Victoria was a worthy coconspirator. From the chair in the corner, where Agnes sat, it seemed that Joshua took an inordinately long time on what was usually a quick examination. Worry so weighed on her that the physician's

customary thoroughness seemed, this time, to be filled with dire meaning..THE SANDMAN WAS powerless to cast a spell of sleep while Junior spent the night flushing away enough water to drain a reservoir..Junior was at critical depth. The psychological pressure was at least five thousand pounds per square inch and growing by the second. Implosion imminent.

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