

## THE WHITE CHRISTMAS INN A NOVEL

scraps of night that have lingered long after dawn dart agitatedly in and out of the tree, from branch to branch.. "Pie, pie, pie, pie, pie, pie, pie, pie," Barty repeated in the same tone of self-satisfied delight that he used when announcing "Barty potty." Although, by unspoken agreement, they avoided any talk of loss and death, the mood remained grim. Angel sat in thoughtful silence, pushing her food around her plate rather than eating it. Her demeanor intrigued Tom, and he noticed that it worried her mother, who put a different interpretation on it than he did.. As long as Junior continued to fake sleep, the cop couldn't be absolutely sure that any deception was taking place.. "Where did it go?" Grace asked her granddaughter, making as much effort as she could to lighten the mood for the girl's sake.. "He worked in your shipyard, your highness." Losen liked to be called by kingly titles.. The detective was driven by this string theory of his, and maybe he also saw visions or even heard voices, like Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc with out beauty or grace, Joan of Arc with a service revolver and the authority to. Some listings didn't include first names, only initials. Every time he came across the initial B, he put a red heck mark beside it with a fine point felt-tip pen.. Repressing a smirk, feigning a respectful solemnity, he dared to glance at Vanadium, but the detective stared into Naomi's grave as though he hadn't heard the mockery-or, having heard it, didn't recognize it for what it was.. Apparently, he didn't lean back far enough, because amazingly he landed on his feet in the winter-faded grass. The shock buckled him, and he dropped to his knees. Still cradling Grace, he lowered her to the ground as gently as he'd ever lowered fragile Perri onto her bed-quite as if he had planned it this way.. 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.. "Honey," she said, crouching to peer at him through the vertical slats of the playpen, "what're you doing?" Junior blinked and dared not speak, because he didn't know any Bartholomew, and now he was certain the cop was weaving an elaborate web of deceit, setting a trap. Why would he have spoken a name that meant nothing to him?.. "In addition to that policy," said Vinnie, "there's another. . . --he filled his lungs, hesitated, then exhaled the air and the sum with a tremor---seven hundred fifty thousand. Three-quarters of a million dollars.".. As early as this evening, here at her son's bedside, Agnes began dimly to sense that certain of these amusing conversations with Barty might not be as fanciful as they seemed, that he was expressing in a childlike way some truth that she had assumed was fantasy.. "I don't ... don't understand." Blinking sleepily, pretending to be still thickheaded from tranquilizers and whatever other drugs they were dripping into his veins, Junior was pleased by the note of perplexity in his hoarse voice, although he knew that even an Oscar-caliber performance would not win over this critic.. Junior knew that he must remain vigilant. Vigilant and focused until January 12 had come and gone. Eight days to go.. He had visited the library primarily to confirm that Harrison White was unquestionably dead. He'd shot the man four times. Two bullets 'in the gas tank of the stolen Pontiac destroyed the parsonage and should have incinerated the reverend. When you were dealing with black magic, however, you could never be too cautious.. You scrawl names on the walls with your own blood, play Psycho with a Sheetrock stand-in for Janet Leigh-and then fly off to Reno for a weekend of blackjack, stage shows, and all-you-can-eat buffets. Not likely.. The enormous canopy of the oak didn't shelter the lawn beneath it. The leaves spooned the rain from the air, measuring it by the ounce, releasing it in thick drizzles instead of drop by drop.. Maria's mother, visiting from Mexico, was babysitting, so Maria came without her children, as a guest, joining Agnes and the laugh-a-minute Isaacson twins, chroniclers of destruction. They ate in the dining room, rather than at the kitchen dinette, with a lace-trimmed tablecloth, the good china, crystal wineglasses, and fresh flowers.. A mutual interest in ballroom dancing had resulted in their introduction when each needed a new partner for a fox-trot and swing competition. Nolly had started taking lessons five years before he had met Kathleen.. "And, of course, you'll need to make arrangements for the body," said Dr. Lipscomb. "Sister Josephina will provide you with a room, a phone, privacy, whatever you need, and for however long you need.".. He'd acted boldly, recklessly, without scoping the territory to be sure Prosser was alone. The accountant lived by himself, but a visitor might be present.. When the ophthalmologist saw her misery, his kind face softened further, and his pity became palpable.. His words echoed back to her from July: My cold's just here, not every place I am.. After clicking off the kitchen lights, the hall light, and the light in the foyer, he pulled shut the front door, leaving the house dark and silent behind him.. Of all the kindnesses that we can do for one another, the most precious of all gifts-time-is not ours to give. Bearing this in mind, Agnes did her best to guide her extended family through its grieving for Harrison and for Jacob, into happier days. Respect must be paid, precious memories nurtured, but life also must go on.. 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.. When she tried to say bow, the how of speech eluded her, and she sat as mute as if no words had ever passed her lips before.. By November 1967, the Father Brown detective stories, written for mystery-loving adults by G. K. Chesterton, thrilled Barty. This series of books would retain a special place in his heart for the rest of his life-as would Robert Heinlein's *The Star Beast*, which was among his Christmas gifts that year.. Angel didn't join the grieving women, but sat on the floor in front of the television, switching back and forth between Gunsmoke and The Monkees. Too young to be genuinely involved in either show, nevertheless she occasionally made gunfire sounds when Marshal Dillon went into battle or invented her own lyrics to sing along with the Monkees.. WITH BRIGHT BEACH under assault by one miserable flu and by an uncountable variety of common colds, business was brisk this Monday at Damascus Pharmacy.. When he reported for a physical and a reassessment of his draft classification, on Wednesday, December 15, he left the insert in his hitching shoe; however, he limped like old Walter Brennan, the actor, hitching around the ranch in *The Real McCoys*.. Most likely, if Victoria was entertaining,

the visitor's car would have been parked in the driveway..of fists, hard blows, and his father's heavy breathing as he deals out the punishment. Edom himself lies face down in.No, impossible. He had killed Victoria almost a year and a half before this phone call. When you were dead, you were gone forever..Wishing he had left the gauze wrappings on his face, but afraid that the airwaves might already be carrying news of the bandaged man who had killed a minister in Spruce Hills, Junior abandoned the Dodge and hurriedly walked back to the private-service terminal, where the pilot from Sacramento waited. At the sight of his passenger, the pilot blanched and said, Allergic reaction to WHAT? And Junior said, Camellias, because Sacramento was the Camellia Capital of the World, and all that he wanted was to get back there, where he'd left his new Ford van and his Sklents and his Zedd collection and everything he needed to live in the future. The pilot couldn't conceal his intense revulsion, and Junior knew that he would have been stranded if he hadn't paid the round-trip charter fare in advance..A half bath downstairs. Two bedrooms and a full bath on the upper floor. All deserted..when red aces weft followed by disturbing jacks, Agnes had pretended to take her son's card-told fortune lightly, especially the frightful part of it. In fact, a coldness had twisted through her heart..Ursula K. Le Guin.The house was hers, free and clear of mortgages. There were two savings accounts to which Joey had diligently made deposits weekly through nine years of marriage..FOR JUNIOR CAIN, the Year of the Horse (1966) and the Year of the Sheep (1967) offered many opportunities for personal growth and self-improvement. Even if by Christmas Eve, '67, Junior would not be able to take a dry walk in the rain, this nevertheless was a period of great achievement and much pleasure for him..An unfortunately bumpy ride for the deceased: along the hallway, through the foyer, across the entry threshold, down the porch steps, across a lawn dappled with pine shadows and yellow moonlight, to the graveled driveway. No complaints..Agnes found this turn of events amazing, amusing, ironic-and a little sad. She would have dearly loved to teach the boy to read and write, to see his knowledge and competence slowly flower under her care. Although she fully supported Barty's exploration of his gifts, and although she was proud of his astounding achievements, she felt that his swift advancement was robbing her of some of the shared joy of his childhood, even though he remained in so many ways a child..Even as the morning matured, the fog and the rain conspired to bar all but a faint gray daylight from St. Mary's. Shadows flourished..In the dark woods of the dream, still the presence: faceless and silent, radiating a merciless intent..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..Following a month of recuperation and postoperative medical care, Junior was able to return to his twice-a-week classes in art appreciation. He resumed, as well, his almost daily strolls through the city's better galleries and fine museums..In that slow, flat delivery with which Junior was becoming increasingly impatient, Detective Vanadium said, "We all were, Doctor. It was another election year, remember? More than once during that campaign, I could've chugged ipecac. What else would work if I wanted to have a good vomit?" .No weekend had ever passed so quickly, and no midnight had ever brought with it such dread..Looking toward the nearest window, where the wet night kissed the glass, he said, "Lawn sprinklers?" . "I never saw a Moor--never saw the Sea--Yet know I how the Heather looks--And what a Billow be." ".He couldn't remember on what principle he'd considered firing Magusson. In spite of his faults, the attorney was highly competent..The decision had already been made that Grace would move in with Celestina and then--following the wedding--with Celestina and Wally. In Spruce Hills, she had dear friends whom she would miss, but there was nothing else in Oregon to draw her back, other than the narrow plot beside Harrison, where she expected eventually to be buried. The parsonage fire had destroyed all her personal effects and every family treasure from Celestina's grade-school spelling-bee medals to the last precious photograph. She wanted only to be close to her one remaining daughter and her granddaughter, to be part of the new life that they would build with Wally Lipscomb.. "You're better at concentrative meditation without seed than anyone I've ever known, better than me. That's why you, especially, should never undertake a long session unsupervised," Chicane scolded. "At the very least, the very least, you should use your electronic meditation timer. I don't see it here, do I?" .Surprisingly, he received a lot of gratification from voicing this insult, even though Vanadium was too dead to hear it.. "Well, as years pass, they're going to be a financial burden, if nothing else, so I'm glad I've got a little surprise for you." .The boy wasn't translucent, as his father's ghost had been on that drizzly January night almost three years ago. The same drowned light of this gray afternoon that revealed the gravestones and the dripping."That's obvious to us, but not always to others. Apparently, this would have been some years ago." .Skinny, pasty-faced, chattering sissy," he hissed, still so furious with Neddy that he wanted to jam the pianist's head in the toilet even though he was dead. Jam his head in and stomp on him. Stomp him into the bowl. Flush and flush, stomp and stomp..As soon as he was alone, however, Junior yearned for the nurse to return. Alone, he felt vulnerable, threatened..The roses filling the countersunk vases in the comers of Joey's gravestone were not Edom-grown, but they were Edom-bought. He had visited the florist himself, personally selecting each bloom from the inventory in the cooler; but he didn't have the courage to accompany Agnes and Barty to the grave.. "Bullpoo might not be what they say, but it's the worst that we say. And in fact, in this house, bulldoody is preferred." .In truth, he was terrified. Although his need for her company was so profound that it seemed to arise from his marrow, a part of him marveled-and trembled-at his dedicated pursuit of her..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..She was so hot that the ice melted quickly. A thin trickle slid down her throat, but not enough to take the Sahara out of her voice when she said, "More." . "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." For a moment, Junior was mystified. Vanadium's movements had the quality of ritual, vaguely reminiscent of a priest raising high the Eucharist. Junior didn't care which explanation was correct. Only one thing mattered: The Bartholomew hunt was at last nearing an end. On Wednesday, December 27, Junior met Google, the document forger, in a theater, during a matinee of *Bonnie and Clyde*. For a while, she couldn't get enough air. Felt suffocated. She drew great, raw, shuddering breaths, and thought that she would never be able to quiet herself but quiet came. Entering the bedroom, Junior had expected to cast aside his pistol and draw a knife. But he was no longer in a mood for close-up work. Fortunately, he'd managed to hold on to the gun. JUNIOR CAIN WANDERED among the Philistines, in the gray land of conformity, seeking one-just one-refreshingly repellent canvas, finding only images that welcomed and even charmed, yearning for real art and the vicious emotional whirlpool of despair and disgust that it evoked, finding instead only themes of uplift and images of hope, surrounded by people who seemed to like everything from the paintings to the canapes to the cold January night, people who probably hadn't spent even one day of their lives brooding about the inevitability of nuclear annihilation before the end of this decade, people who smiled too much to be genuine intellectuals, and he felt more alone and threatened than eyeless Samson chained in Gaza. Delighted to be dating someone who lived neck-deep in culture especially after two months with Tammy Bean, the money maiden. Junior was surprised that he didn't score with Frieda on the first date. He was usually irresistible even to women who weren't sluts. Fourth and last, he was surprised that Kickmule was a legitimate surname. This information wasn't of immediate importance to him, but if ever his Gammoner and Pinchbeck identities were compromised and he required false ID in a new name, he would call himself Eric Kickmule. Or possibly Wolfgang Kickmule. That sounded really tough. No one would mess with a man named Kickmule. The porch light wasn't on. No landscape lighting brightened the backyard. Barty was a gray shadow moving through darkness and through the darkling drizzle. "Just now." Although Angel tried to sound nonchalant, she was trembling. "I'm not sure I can do it again." Downstairs, two shots cracked, and an instant after the second, an explosion shook the parsonage as though the long-promised Judgment were at hand. This was a real explosion, not the impact of another runaway Pontiac. Waking from a starry night in the Old West into electric light, gazing up into a blur of faces sans cowboy hats, Agnes felt someone moving a piece of ice in slow circles over her bare abdomen. Shivering as the cold water trickled down her sides, she tried to ask them why they were applying ice when she was already chilled to the bone, but she couldn't find her voice. After his conversation with Magusson, however, Junior realized this fear was irrational. If the detective had miraculously escaped the cold waters of the lake, he would have been in need of emergency medical treatment. He would have staggered or crawled to the county highway in search of help, unaware that Junior had framed him for Victoria's murder, too badly wounded to care about anything but getting medical attention. "A friend's daughter. They say she died in a traffic accident down in San Francisco. She was even younger than Naomi." Tom Vanadium was too unnerved by the Cain scare to be interested in the newspaper anymore. The strong black coffee, superb before, tasted bitter now. 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. "Will I love you tomorrow, you mean, and the day after tomorrow, and on forever? Of course, forever, Wally, always." He raised one hand to halt the genteel debate. "The whole reason I stopped here first, before taking you folks on to my place, is so I wouldn't have to bring your suitcases back after Agnes won you over. This is where you'll be happiest, though you're always welcome if she tries to work you to death." Had Junior been chest-deep in wet concrete, he would have been more mobile than he was now. He had no feeling in his legs. In answer, Wally came running with his heavy medical bag, as he was vow doctor to some people on the pie route. "The weather's a lot better than I expected, so I went back to change into lighter clothes." She wasn't listening closely to him. Numb. She felt as though she were half anesthetized. She was looking past him, at nothing, and his Voice seemed to be coming to her through several layers of surgical masks, though he now wore none at all. Throughout lunch and, indeed, during his hours as an outpatient at the hospital, Barty gave no indication that he understood the gravity of his situation. He remained cheerful, charming the doctors and technicians with his sweet personality and precocious chatter. 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. Their struggle to put their sorrow into words moved Agnes not because they cared so deeply, but because in the end they were unable to express themselves adequately. Without the relief provided by expression, their anguish grew corrosive. Their lifelong introversion left them without the social skills to unburden themselves or to provide solace to others. Worse, their obsessions with death, in all its many means and mechanisms, had prepared them to expect Barty's cancer, which left them neither shocked nor capable of consolation, but merely resigned. Ultimately, in great frustration, each twin was reduced to fragmented sentences, crippled gestures, quiet tears-and Agnes became the only consoler. This was a test of Junior's gullibility, and he would not give Vanadium the satisfaction of searching his robe for the coin. This was a good night for television. To Tell the Truth at seven-thirty, followed by I've Got a Secret, The Lucy Show, and The Andy Griffith Show. The new Lucy wasn't quite as good as the old show; Paul and Perri missed Desi Arnaz and William Frawley. "Maybe he could if he was able to lift it, but I couldn't throw a pig or an Oreo or anything else into any other place. It's just not something I know how to do." Shortly after Agnes turned out the light, she said, "Kiddo, it's been one whole week since you walked where the rain wasn't, and I've been doing a lot of thinking about that." Celestina had wanted to go to Oregon for the service, but Tom, Max Bellini, the Spruce Hills police, and Wally Lipscomb-to whom, by Sunday, she'd begun talking almost hourly on the telephone-all advised strenuously against making the trip. A man as crazed and as reckless as Enoch Cain, expecting to

find her at the funeral home or the cemetery, might not be deterred by a police guard, no matter what its size..Oblivious that she and Barty had become the center of attention, Angel said, "Does he ever get the quarters back?." "Better hold on tight to her," Wally warned Celestina, braking to a halt at the intersection. "She'll float up and away, then we'll have to call the fire department to get her down." Perhaps these two months of frustration had brought him to this: hair-trigger nerves, fevered imagination, and anticipation distilled into dread..She didn't hide the diagnosis from the family, but she delayed telling them the prognosis, which was bleak. Already, her bones were tender, packed full of mutated immature white cells that hindered the production of normal white cells, red cells, and platelets..Agnes was so weary, her eyes so sore and grainy, that even this soft radiance stung. She almost closed her eyes and gave herself to sleep again, that little brother of Death, which was now her only solace. What she saw in the lamplight, however, compelled her attention..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..He didn't realize he was swinging the candlestick at Vanadium's face until he saw the blow land. And then he couldn't stop himself from swinging it yet once more.."Ouch," said Edom, and this earned him loving smiles from Maria, Agnes, and Barty..Since the cops believed that Junior accidentally shot himself while searching for a nonexistent burglar, he was already in their book as an idiot. If he tried to explain how Vanadium had tormented him with the quarter, and how a quarter turned up, of all places, in his cheeseburger, they would figure him for a hopeless hysteric.."I'm glad to hear it," Tom said. His thin smile might have been ironic, though it wasn't easy to interpret the meaning of any subtle expression on his hammered face.Apparently Maria wished that she'd brought a rosary to dinner. With the fingers of her right hand, she pinched the knuckles of her left, one after the other, as if they were beads..She could see now what she hadn't seen when running with him through the cemetery, because she was looking directly at him. Yet even seeing did not make it easy to believe..He doubted the Studebaker would ever be found, but successful men were, without exception, those who paid attention to detail..Permissions Department, Harcourt, Inc., 6277 Sea Harbor Drive, Orlando, Florida 32887-6777. www.harcourt.com "Darkrose and Diamond" first appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction..Packed full of aftermath, the movie was too violent for Junior's taste. He had wanted to meet at a showing of Doctor Dolittle or The Graduate. But Google, as paranoid as a lab rat after half a lifetime of electroshock experiments, insisted on choosing the theater..He was as solid as any boy. He was in the day but not in the rain. He was moving toward the back of the car..Here, now, the dinner guest, entering the kitchen. He carried the wineglass and the rose in his left hand. The Merlot was tucked under his arm. In his right hand was a small, brightly wrapped gift box..The rain-washed street shimmered greasily under the tires, and the intersection lay halfway up a long hill, so gravity was aligned with fate against them. The driver's side of the Pontiac lifted. Beyond the windshield, the main drag of Bright Beach tilted crazily. The passenger's side slammed against the pavement.Candle flames blurred into bright smears, and the faces of her good parents shimmered like the half-seen countenances of angels in dreams..In the top drawer, in addition to the expected items, Tom Vanadium found a gallery brochure for an art exhibition. In the hooded flashlight beam, the name Celestina White seemed to flare off the glossy paper as though printed in reflective ink..He slept outdoors rarely and otherwise stayed in inexpensive motels, boardinghouses, and YMCAs..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." He briefly considered playing dumb, but he knew she was too smart for that. "Gunsmoke, you mean. Listen, I know you'll do whatever's necessary to keep Angel safe, because you love her so much. Love will give.Celestina threw down the weapon even before she turned, and as two cops entered the room, she cried, "He's getting away!".With the determination of any pulp-magazine adventurer, Paul walked in sunshine and in rain. He walked in heat and cold. Wind did not deter him, nor lightning..She asked him how many fingers she was holding up, and he said four, and four it was. Then two fingers. Then seven. Her hands so pale, the palms both bruised.."Thirsty," Agnes rasped. Her voice was Sahara sand abrading anienct stone, the dry whisper of a pharaoh's mummy talking to itself in a vaulted sealed for three thousand years..This was not the same card he'd found at his bedside, under two dimes and a nickel, on the night following Naomi's funeral. He had torn that one and had thrown it away..EACH MOMENTOUS DAY, the work was done in memory of his mother. At Pie Lady Services, always, they sought new recipes and new ways to brighten the corner where they were..By Friday morning, September 10, little more than forty-eight hours after the shooting, he felt good and was in fine spirits..Aftermath was not important. Only movement mattered. Just forget the busload of nuns smashed on the tracks, and stay with the onrushing train. Keep moving, looking forward, always forward..Those ominous words again, turning through his memory, reel to reel. This time he actually heard them spoken. The voice commanded minded attention with a deeper timbre and crisper diction than his own.."Even in an infinite number of worlds," Wally objected, "there's no place I was that stupid." "You should be with your children," Agnes worried. Maria looked up. "My babies are sitted with my sister." "Are you all right?" he asked as he opened the passenger's door and helped her into the car..Agnes supposed Jacob trembled in anticipation of the crash of an airliner or at least a light aircraft. Edom might be calculating the odds that this serene place-at this specific hour-would be the impact point for one of those planet-killing asteroids that reputedly wiped most life off the earth every few hundred thousand years or so..Houses made settling noises all the time. That was one reason why he couldn't rely much on sound to guide him through the darkness. A noise he thought had been made by the weight of his tread might as easily have been produced by the house itself as it adjusted to the.One detail. One only. It was a crucial detail, however, one that she absolutely must confirm before she left St. Mary's, even if she would be required to look at the child once more, this spawn of violence, this killer of her sister..Because she'd enjoyed some limited use of her right arm, it was less wasted than her left,

although not normal. Paul pulled down that sleeve of her pajamas..Following little Bartholomew's murder, however, people might remember the man who had been asking after the mother, Celestina. Junior wasn't just any man, either; irresistibly handsome, he left an indelible impression on people, especially on women. Inevitably, the cops would be knocking on his door, sooner or later..For eight months following that night, until late September of 1965, Vanadium had been in a coma, and his doctors had not expected him to regain consciousness. A passing motorist had found him lying along the highway near the lake, soaked and muddy. When, after his long sleep, he awakened in the hospital, withered and weak, he'd had no memory of anything after walking into Victoria's kitchen-except a vague, dreamlike recollection of swimming up from a sinking car..He traveled prairies and mountains and valleys, passed fields rich in every imaginable crop, crossed great forests and wide rivers. He walked in fierce storms when thunder crushed the sky and lightning tore it, walked in wind that skinned the bare earth and sheared green tresses from trees, and walked also in sun-scrubbed days as blue and clean as ever there had been in Eden..In spite of her nature, Agnes could not find forgiveness in her heart this time. Words of absolution clotted in her throat. Her bitterness dismayed her, but she could not deny it.. "When you cut Naomi's string, you put an end to the effects that I her music would have on the lives of others and on the shape of the future. YOU struck a discord that can be heard, however faintly, all the way to the farthest end of the universe." "You feel remorse, though," said Agnes. "I can see you do. And not just because of what happened to your hands." 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..She could have gone at him with the chair once more, but it was falling apart. Instead, she abandoned furniture for the promise of a firearm, dropped to her knees, and snatched the discarded pistol magazine off the floor..Evidently, the hero was accustomed to encounters of this nature. He rose, pulled out the unused fourth chair. "Please sit with us."

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