

STUDIEN STIFTUNGEN IM KOENIGREICHE BOEHMEN 1880 1884 VOL 10

Celestina, surprised by Lipscomb's arrival, was still mentally numb from Neddy's harangue. "Doctor, I didn't know you were coming." By his twelfth month, he was toilet-trained, and every time that he had the need to use his colorful little bathroom chair, he proudly and repeatedly announced to everyone, "Barty potty." Inking? The sequined and tasseled hat of fame was too gaudy for her; she was a minister's daughter, from Spruce Hills, Oregon, more comfortable in a baseball cap. 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. And speak the tongues of man and drake. "Stop it, stop it!" Agnes, only ten years old, slender and shaking, but wild with righteousness, until now held in thrall by her own fear, by the memory of all the beatings that she herself has taken. She screams at their father and strikes him with a book she's brought from the house. The Bible. She strikes their father with the Bible, from which he's read to them every night of their lives. He drops the roses, tears the holy book out of Agnes's hands, and pitches it across the yard. He rakes up a handful of the scattered roses, intending to make his son resume this dinner of sin, but here comes Agnes once more, the Bible recovered, brandishing it at him, and now she says what all of them know to be true but what none of them has ever dared say, what even Agnes herself will never again dare to say after this day, not while the old man lives, but she dares to say it now, holding the Bible toward him, so he can see the gold-embossed cross upon the imitation-leather cover. "Murderer," Agnes says. "Murderer." And Edom knows that they're all as good as dead now, that their father will slaughter them right here, right this minute, in his rage. "Murderer," she says accusingly, behind the shield of the Bible, and she doesn't mean that he is killing Edom, but that he killed their mother, that they heard him in the night, three years before, heard the short but awful struggle, and know that what happened was no accident. Roses fall from his skinned and pierced hands, a flurry of petals yellow and petals red. He rises and takes a step toward Agnes, his dripping fists crimson with his blood and with Edom's. Agnes doesn't back away, but thrusts the book toward him, and scintillant sunlight caresses the cross. Instead of tearing the book out of her hands again, their father stalks away, into the house, surely to return with club or cleaver ... yet they will see no more of him this day. Then Agnes-with tweezers for the thorns, with a basin full of warm water and a washcloth, with iodine and Neosporin and bandages-kneels beside him in the yard. Jacob, too, comes forth from the dark crawlspace under the porch, having watched in terror from behind the latticework skirt. He is shaking, crying, flushed with embarrassment because he didn't intervene, although he was wise to hide, for the disciplinary beating of one twin usually leads to the pointless beating of the other. Agnes gradually settles Jacob by involving him in the treatment of his brother's wounds, and to Edom she says, often thereafter, "I love your roses, Edom. I love your roses. God loves your roses, Edom." Overhead, agitated wings quiet to a soft flutter, and the shrieking crows grow silent. The air pools as still and heavy as the water in a hidden lagoon within a secret glade, in the perfect garden of the unfallen.... Happiness could grow out of unspeakable tragedy with such vigor that it produced dazzling blooms and lush green bracts. This insight served, for Celestina, as a primary inspiration for her painting and as proof of the grace granted in this world that we might perceive and be sustained by the promise of an ultimate joy to come. "Yes. More about that later, just let me make it clear that an interest in physics doesn't make me a physicist. Even if I were, I couldn't explain quantum mechanics in an hour or a year. Some say quantum theory is so weird that no one can fully understand all its implications. Some things proven in quantum experiments seem to defy common sense, and I'll lay out a few for you, just to give you the flavor. First, on the subatomic level, effect sometimes comes before cause. In other words, an event can happen before the reason for it ever occurs. Equally odd ... in an experiment with a human observer, subatomic particles behave differently from the way they behave when the experiment is unobserved while in progress and the results are examined only after the fact-which might suggest that human will, even subconsciously expressed, shapes reality." Although their apartments were above the garage, back to back, each was served by a separate exterior staircase. As often as either man entered the other's domain, they might as well have lived hundreds of miles apart. With that thought, he made himself laugh. Unfortunately, his laughter was high-pitched and shaky, and it scared the hell out of him. Behind her, he said, "And is that my gray cardigan? What did you do to my cardigan?" "What's this?" the man asked her, as Sinatra swooped through "Come Fly with Me." "Yes, but it's a Catholic hospital, and they offer this option to all unwed mothers-doesn't matter what their religion." Just as Sinatra broke into song again, Junior thought he heard a footstep on the wood floor of the hallway, and the creak of a board. The music masked the sounds of the visitor's approach if, indeed, he was approaching. With his bent thumb against the crook of his forefinger, he flipped the quarter. Even as the coin snapped off the thumbnail and began to stir the air, Tom flung up both hands, fingers spread to show them empty and to distract. Yet on a second look, the coin was not airborne as it had seemed to be, no longer spinning-wink, wink-before their dazzled eyes. It had vanished as though into the payment slot of an ethereal vending machine that dispensed mystery in return. He backed toward the hall door, watching as the fire spread. After lingering until certain that the house would soon be a seething pyre, he finally sprinted along the hall to the front door. Junior was accustomed to having women seduce him. His good looks were a blessing of nature. His commitment to improving his mind made him interesting. Most important, from the books of Caesar Zedd, he had learned how to be irresistibly charming. Another stiff might have required dragging; but Neddy weighed hardly more than a five-foot-ten breadstick. Junior hauled the body off the ground and slung it over one shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Ah, evidently you can read my mind. Scarier than heart reading

any day. Maybe there's a thin line between minister's daughter and witch." Still relishing her little pretense of rejection, Victoria did not touch the rose. "What kind of woman do you think I am?" The funeral director and his assistant were the only people, other than Junior, remaining at the grave. They asked if they might lower the casket or if he would rather that they wait until he was gone..He slid his plate aside. From a pocket, he withdrew a quarter, which always served him as well with children as with murderers..A delay of a few hours, before getting her under a physician's care, might still be risky. But so was forcing her into a local hospital to endure the mortification she desperately wanted to avoid..A lamp with a fringed silk shade spread small feathery wings of golden light over one corner of the living room. On the coffee table were three decorative blown-glass oil lamps, ashimmer..Neddy favored a quick greeting, two curt pumps, but Junior held fast after the handshake was over. He didn't grind the musician's knuckles, nothing so crude, just held on pleasantly but firmly. His intention was to confuse and further rattle the man, taking advantage of his obvious dislike of having his personal space encroached upon, in the hope that Neddy would reveal why he'd been watching Junior so intently from across the room.. "Whatever you're paying here, that's what you'll pay for the new place," Lipscomb said..In his voice, he heard a tremor that had nothing to do with the hideous deaths in Effingham more than sixteen years previous..Since childhood, he had been waiting for this moment-if indeed it was The Moment-and he had nearly lost hope that the much-desired encounter would ever come to pass. He had expected to find others with his perceptions among physicists or mathematicians, among monks or mystics, but never in the form of a three-year-old girl dressed all in midnight-blue except for a red belt and two red hair bows.. "Another year," Edom said, "and instead of me, Barty can drive the car for you." Agnes returned home from a pie run with the usual team-grown to five vehicles, including paid employees-to find a gathering in the yard and Barty halfway up the oak..Junior strove to appear properly mortified. "Thought I heard something. Searched the apartment." Junior had left the front door locked, because if unlocked, it would look as though he had wanted to facilitate their entry, and it would make them suspicious of the whole scenario..Six paces past that marker floorboard, Barty had the strangest feeling that someone was in the hallway with him..Being ruthlessly honest with himself, as always, he acknowledged that killing Tammy would not solve his problem. She might have told friends and colleagues about the Rolex, just as she had surely shared with her girlfriends the juiciest details about Junior's unequalled lovemaking. During the two months that he and the cat woman dated, others had heard her call him Eenie. He couldn't kill Tammy and all her friends and colleagues, at least not on a timely enough schedule to thwart the police..The subtle distortions in his vision, which caused lines of type to twist, didn't appear to trouble Barty much otherwise. He moved as quickly and as surely as ever, with his special grace.. "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."..support as he had only pretended to need it previously. He felt as if he had become the mere shell of a man and that the right note would shatter him as a properly piercing tone can shatter crystal..Nothing remained to be done but to press her shoe in the butter and hammer her head into the corner of the oven door..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?"..Finally: "A trial lawyer, whether specializing in criminal or civil matters, is like an actor, Mr. Cain. He must believe deeply in his role, in the truth of his portrayal, if he's to be convincing. I always believe in the innocence of my clients in order to achieve the best possible settlement for them."..After adjusting the hairpin that held her lace mantilla, Maria passed from the narthex into the nave She dipped two fingers in the holy water that glimmered in the marble font, and crossed herself..To become a physical therapist, Junior had taken more than massage classes, so he knew what hematemeses meant. Hematemesis: vomiting of blood..Of course, Angel might have been playing around with the talking book. Or, even though she'd left the dolls downstairs, she might have been filling the time until Barty's return by having a nice chat with Miss Pixie and Miss Velveeta. She had other voices, too, for other dolls, and one for a sock puppet named Smelly..Agnes dropped to one knee before the boy and held him gently by the shoulders. "Let me look."..Scowling, Joey stared at the floor in puzzlement, shifted his weight from one foot to the other, sighed, turned his attention to the ceiling, and shifted his weight again, for all the world like a trained bear that couldn't quite remember how to perform its next trick.. "September 27, 1962. Barcelona, Spain. A flood killed four hundred forty-five people."..In the first drawer, he discovered an address book. Logically, Vanadium would have taken this with him, even if on the lam from a murder rap, so Junior tucked it in his jacket pocket..Fortunately, at least the desk was cigarette-scarred, because it came with the office. It had been the property of a skip-tracer named Otto Zelm, who'd made a good living at the kind of work Nolly avoided out of boredom: tracking down deadbeats and repossessing their vehicles. On a stakeout, Zelm fell asleep in his car, while smoking, thereby triggering the payoff of both life- and casualty-insurance policies, and freeing the lease on this furnished space.. "Well," Kathleen said, "even if the money wasn't so nice, I'd be sorry to see this case end."..A forgetful client had left the bumbershoot in the office six months ago. Otherwise, Nolly wouldn't have had any umbrella at all..He switched off the flashlight and stood solemnly for a moment, paying his respects to Seraphim. She had been so sweet, so innocent, so supple, so exquisitely proportioned..When the nurse was gone, alone with his mother as they waited for the orderly to bring a gurney, Barty said, "Come close."..Not cheerful, life-loving, high-spirited, churchgoing Naomi. She saw every day through a golden haze that came from the sun in her heart..When together in Agnes's company, Edom and Jacob were brothers, comfortable with each other. But together, just the two, no Agnes, they were more awkward than strangers, because strangers had no shared history to overcome..By invoking the word emergency, Celestina was able quickly to reach her own physician in San Francisco. He agreed to treat Phimie and to have her admitted to St. Mary's upon her arrival from Oregon..As always, curious about how others lived-or, in this case, bad lived-Junior explored the house, poking in drawers and closets. For a

widower, Bartholomew Prosser was neat and well-organized..He felt remarkably well when he arrived home: calm, proud of his quick thinking and stalwart action, pleasantly tired. He hadn't chosen to kill again; this obligation had been thrust on him by fate. Yet he had proven that the boldness he'd shown on the fire tower, rather than being a transient strength, was a deeply rooted quality..If her beautiful son was to be a prodigy of any kind, she would thank God for his talent and would do anything she could to help him achieve his destiny..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..Words eluded him again, and he surveyed the coffee shop, as if someone might step forward to speak for him. He realized people were staring, and embarrassment drew a tighter knot in his tongue..In a pew in Old St. Mary's Church, in Chinatown, Junior took delivery of the lock-release gun and the untraceable 9-mm pistol with the custom-machined silencer, as previously arranged. The church was deserted at ten o'clock in the morning. The shadowy interior and the menacing religious figures gave him the creeps..Jacob cooked corn bread, cheese-and-parsley omelettes, and crisp home fries with a dash of onion salt..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..By the time he arrived at his apartment, Junior could think of no better action to take, so he phoned Simon Magusson, his attorney in Spruce Hills..As kids-living in a house that was run like a prison, stifled by the oppressive rule of a morose father who believed that any form of entertainment was an offense against God-they conducted secret card games as their primary act of rebellion. A deck of cards was small enough to hide quickly and to keep hidden successfully even during one of their father's painstakingly thorough room searches..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.. "When I couldn't get enough nightclub and theater bookings for my magic act anymore ... I turned to gambling."..Because the glass wings of the open window didn't lie flat against the exterior wall, they blocked his view. He had to thrust himself farther through the opening, until he seesawed on the sill, before he could see the length of the entire block, in which the gallery stood at approximately the middle..For more than two weeks, Agnes's heart had been a clangorous place, filled with the rattle and bang of hard emotions, but now a sort of quiet had come upon it, a peace that, if it held, might one day allow joy again..Agnes pulled the stack of cards in front of her. She discarded the first two, as Maria would have done, and turned over the third..In the chilly darkness, his breath plumed visibly, frosted by moonlight. The rapidity and raggedness of his radiant exhalations would have marked him as a guilty man if witnesses had been present..Along Junior's hairline, on his cheeks, his chin, and his upper lip, a double score of hard little knots had risen, angry red and hot to the touch. Having previously experienced a particularly vicious case of the hives, Junior realized this was something new-and worse. To the pilot, he replied, "Allergic reaction.".. "By the way he acted, you'd have sworn that he gave me and Angel shelter in the storm, back then, instead of turning us out to freeze in the snow."..Junior's breath smoked from him as if he contained a seething fire of his own. He felt a sheen of condensation arise on his face, cold and invigorating... So he calls it the King. If you find him his King, he'll treat you well. He's often here. Come on, I'll show you. Dog can't track till he's had the scent.".. "They're all the family I have," Junior said with what he hoped sounded like sorrow and long-suffering love..Laying the gun on the newspaper, he dropped into the chair. He picked up his coffee. The search of the house had been conducted with such urgency that the java was still pleasantly hot.. "Cancer," he said, because that was more tragic and far less suspicious than a fall from a fire tower..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..Never would he pause to reload at this desperate penultimate moment, when success or failure might be decided in mere seconds. That would be the choice of a man who thought first and acted later, the behavior of a born loser..to believe that any man with such a hard gut slung over his belt, with a bull neck..He would have done it, too, and risked establishing a pattern that police might notice; but the still, small voice of Zedd guided him now, as so often before, and counseled calm, counseled focus..He intended to mash the sole of Victoria's right shoe in the pat of butter and leave a long smear on the floor, as though she slipped on it and fell toward the ovens..When she closed the front door and turned away from it, Agnes bumped her swollen belly into Joey. His eyebrows shot up, and he put his hands on her distended abdomen, as if she were more fragile than a robin's egg and more valuable than one by Faberge..After coffee had been served, when Celestina and Wally were no longer the center of attention, he indicated the array of desserts with his fork, smiled, and said, "I just want you to know, Celie, that these are sweets enough until we're married."..Grace White was petite, and Paul wasn't. Otherwise he might not have been able to halt her determined rush toward her husband, might not have been able to scoop her off her feet and, carrying her in his arms, spirit her to safety..Nolly was, as usual, "Nolly" to everyone, but here Kathleen was "Mrs. Wulfstan."..Agnes rubbed noses with him again, kissed him, and rose from the edge of the bed.. "Holding fast to the boy's right foot, Jacob observed that one elevator might descend safely but that if they took two, one or the other was certain to crash to the bottom of the shaft, considering the unreliability of all machinery made by man..Glass in the door next to Agnes cracked, dissolved. Pebbly blacktop like a dragon flank of glistening scales hissed past the broken window, inches from her face..The study was the size of a bathroom. The cramped space barely allowed for a battered pine desk, a chair, and one filing cabinet..Neddy's face didn't appear to be as pale as it had been earlier. An undertone of gray, possibly blue, darkened the skin..Recognizing the danger of saying the wrong thing, the potential for self-incrimination, Junior clenched his jaws and waited..Edom complied, and in the arc of

red Bicycle patterns, one card revealed too much white corner, because it was the only one face up..She sat at the kitchen table, staring at the glass. After a while she emptied it in the sink without having taken a sip..Out of a sphinx face, Obadiah conjured a smile that lifted the point of his white goatee when he turned his head to look at Edom. "Ah ... so long ago," he murmured, as though speaking to himself. "So long ago ... but I remember now." He winked at Edom..Junior decided to attend the festivities, after all, motivated by the prospect of connecting with a woman more pliant than the Baval Poriferan sculpture..Increasingly, he used meditation to relieve stress. He was so skilled at concentrative meditation without seed-blanking his mind-that half an hour of it was as refreshing as a night's sleep..When the old man died and Agnes inherited the property, the three of them played cards in the backyard for the first time on the day of his funeral, played openly rather than in secret, almost giddy with freedom. Eventually, when Agnes fell in love and married, Joey Lampion joined their card games, and thereafter, Jacob and Edom enjoyed a greater sense of family than they had ever known before..Unable to hold his breath or to quiet his miserable sobbing, Junior couldn't hear clearly enough to discern whether the sounds of the stalking sculpture were real or imagined. He knew that they had to be imaginary, but he felt they were real..From the darkness of his room, Barty now spoke the words for which Agnes had been waiting, his whisper soft yet resonant in the quiet house: "Good-night, Daddy."It occurred to her that the knave had come, as foretold by the cards on that night long ago. She had expected the knave to be a man with sharp eyes and a wicked heart, but the curse was cancer and not a man at all..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?". "Thursday it is," he said, clearly delighted to be receiving only a third of the fair-market rental from his apartment..Junior locked the door. He started the engine and drove out of the cemetery faster than was prudent on the winding service road..As Junior paced the hotel room, his fear made way for anger. All he wanted was peace, a chance to grow as a person, an opportunity to improve himself And now this. The unfairness, the injustice, galled him. He seethed with a sense of persecution..Even Barty seemed to be attentive, but Angel happily applied crayons to a coloring book and hummed softly to herself..Quickly, he searched for the source, but in less than a minute, before he could trace the voice, it faded away. Unlike that night in December, this time the singing didn't resume.."We do look somewhat alike," Edom said, shifting his attention to Jacob's left ear..Bressler but no Vanadium. A girl named Angel. Something was wrong here. Something was rotten..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."A speeding truck passed, stirring the fog, and the white broth churned past the car windows, a disorienting swirl..Whereas Edom feared the wrath of nature, Jacob knew that the true hand of doom was the hand of humankind..So runs the water away, away..Since he knew where Celestina would be on January 12, there was no point in taking risks to find her sooner. He had plenty of time to prepare for their encounter, time to savor the sweet anticipation..He repressed the scream, however, because he sensed that if he gave voice to it, he wouldn't be able to silence himself for a long long time..As he stepped out of the street, Don't Walk shortened to Walk, and when he checked for pursuit, he found it. Here came Vanadium, who would have been shivering in want of a topcoat if his flesh had been real.."You're the one who said your cold's just here. Maybe it stays in the kitchen, hoping it'll get a piece of pie."Maybes are for babies, Zedd tells us in Act Now, Think Later. Learning to Trust Your Instincts..Agnes delighted in their conversations. Barty was far ahead of the language learning curve for his age, but he was still a child, and his observations were filled with innocence and charm. "You mean your cold is like in your nose but not in your feet?". "I've got hundreds of files on cases like that," said Jacob, "and much worse. If you're interested, I'll get you copies of some."The guest room. Bring Grace to the window. Disengage the latch. No good. Warped or painted shut. Small panes, sturdy mullions too difficult to break out..Inexplicably, each repetition of Bartholomew heightened Junior's anxiety. The name resonated not just in his ear, but in his blood and bones, in body and mind, as if he were a great bronze bell and Bartholomew the clapper..As best he could, he examined his clothes. They were better pressed than he expected, and not noticeably soiled..Retracing his path across the kitchen, he caught a faint whiff of jasmine from the backyard. Funny, jasmine here inside. Two paces later, he felt a draft..Because he hadn't heard Victoria Bressler speak in so long-and then only on two occasions-and because the woman on the phone had spoken so softly, Junior couldn't tell whether or not their voices were one and the same..He clenched the steering wheel tightly with both hands, clenched his teeth so fiercely that his jaw muscles bulged and twitched, and clenched his mind around a stubborn determination to get control of himself. Slow deep breaths. Positive thoughts..In his mind's eye, he saw the answering machine with uncanny clarity. That curious gadget. Sitting atop the scarred pine desk..Indeed, the tree inspired him. After he shot the girl, he would open the window and toss her body into the oak Let Celestina find her there, randomly pierced by branches in a freestyle crucifixion.."Besides, I still live by my vows as much as possible, though I've had the longest continuing dispensation on record." A smile on that cracked countenance could be touching, but an ironic look now worked less well; it gave Kathleen a chill. "Vanity is a sin I've more easily been able to avoid than some others."On the other hand, killing a stranger like Bartholomew Prosser relieved stress better than sex did. Senseless murder was as relaxing to him as meditation without seed, and probably less dangerous..Frantically, he squirmed around on the floor until he was facing the entrance to the kitchen. Through tears of pain, he expected to see a Frankensteinian shadow loom in the hall, and then the creature itself, gnashing its fork-tine teeth, its corkscrew nipples spinning..Then he closed his eyes, held the revolver in both hands, and at point-blank range, he shot the dead woman twice..Yet when he put her down in the upstairs hall, she cried out for her husband--"Harry!" "-and tried to plunge once more into the narrow stairwell..In adversity lies great opportunity, as Caesar Zedd teaches, and always, of course, there is a bright side even when you aren't able immediately to see it..Junior didn't make the mistake of thinking that Magusson's new conciliatory attitude meant they were friends, that

confidences could be shared or truths exchanged. The money-grubbing toad's only real friend would always be the one he saw in a mirror. If he discovered that Junior was having a great time post-Naomi, Magusson would store the information until he found a way to use it to his advantage..A fine carpenter can wield a hammer with an economy of movement and accuracy as elegant as the motions of a symphony conductor with a baton. A cop directing traffic can make a rough ballet out of the work. However, of all the humble tasks that men and women can transform into visual poetry by the application of athletic agility and grace, clambering into a Dumpster holds the least promise of beautification.. "Let's roll 'em. out," Paul said, and he returned to the station wagon to ride shotgun beside Agnes..Even at this post midnight hour, the lounge would sometimes be as crowded with worried loved ones as at any other time of the day. This morning, however, the only life under the threat of the scythe appeared to be Wally's; the sole vigil being kept was for him..Agnes's sharp intake of breath caused Edom to look up from his nephew's name. Pale, she was, her eyes as haunted as old mansions..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..because even to cry in pain will invite more vicious discipline than the pummeling he's already endured. His father..Having gotten the new roof for them at cost, Agnes subsequently put together donations from a dozen individuals and one church group to cover all but two hundred dollars of the outlay.."-and wherever he went, between his shows, he always gave free performances at nursing homes, schools for the deaf-".Barefoot, in midnight-blue silk pajamas, he walked through his rooms turning on lights in a considered pattern, which he had settled upon after much thought and planning..Her hands were locked together in her lap, gripped so tightly for so long that the muscles in her forearms ached. "What's wrong?"

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