

## COUNTIES OF CHRISTIAN AND TRIGG KENTUCKY

The birthmarked man identified himself as Detective Thomas Vanadium. He did not use the familiar, diminutive form of his name, as had the doctor, and his voice was as uninflected as his face was flat and homely..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..Edom and Jacob flanked the gurney, each gripping one of Barty's feet through the sheet that covered them, escorting him with the same stony determination that you saw on the faces of the Secret Service agents who bracketed the President of the United States..Overlaying the birthmark were brighter stains. The plain face, less homely now, was less flat, too, pocked and torn into a new and horrendous geography..What the commodifiers of fantasy count on and exploit is the insuperable imagination of the reader, child or adult, which gives even these dead things life-of a sort, for a while..Flanked by Dumpsters and trash cans, through steam rising out of grates in the pavement, past parked delivery trucks, here came the dead cop. Running.. "I'm not going anywhere," she pledged. She had realized that his voice was growing heavy with sleep. "But it's time for you to go to dreamland."..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..If the angular mass was Neddy, the vaguely warm, damp something must be the strangled man's protruding tongue..In the Fairmont coffee shop, Junior ordered french fries, a cheeseburger, and cole slaw. He requested that the burger be served cooked but unassembled: the halves of the bun turned face up, the meat pattie positioned separately on the plate, one slice each of tomato and onion arranged beside the pattie, and the slice of unmelted cheese on a separate dish..The 9-mm pistol rested in the complementary shoulder holster, under Junior's leather coat. But the sound-suppressor hadn't been attached; it was in one of his coat pockets. The extended barrel, too long to lay comfortably against his left side, would most likely have hung up on the holster when drawn..He had never expressed opposition to starting a family. She'd had no reason to fear telling him that she was carrying their child.. "My dad's already armored me," Celestina assured her. "He says art lasts, but critics are the buzzing insects of a single summer day."..He went upstairs to change out of his dark blue suit and badly scuffed black shoes..Tom plucked the quarter off the glass, folded it into his right fist, and then at once opened his hand, which was now empty..Shortly after six o'clock, Saturday morning, she stirred from a fretful dream and saw Barty sitting up in bed, reading..On the serving tables, the canap? trays held only stained paper doilies, crumbs, and empty plastic champagne glasses..Although he ate more meals in restaurants than not, he hadn't ordered a burger in twenty-two months, since finding the quarter embedded in the half-melted slice of cheddar, in December of '65. Indeed, since then, he'd never risked a sandwich of any kind in a restaurant, limiting his selections to foods that were served open on the plate..Celestina almost begged off, almost told him that she had no interest in whatever curiosity of medicine or physiology he might have witnessed. The only miracle that would have mattered, Phimie's survival, had not been granted..Carrying the candlestick, he raced to the kitchen at the end of the short hall. The door stood open, but he had to enter the room to see Victoria slumped in one of the two chairs at the small dinette..honor and family. This was life, and everyone lived his life in the shadow of one solemn obligation or another..Her eyes, lustrous pools, brimmed with the need to know, but she respected the deal. "I only half understood all that, and I don't even know which half, but in some strange way, it feels true. Thank you. I will think about it tonight, when I can't sleep." She stepped close and kissed him on the cheek. "Who are you, Tom Vanadium?"..The driver's door opened, shoving aside a damaged tea table, and a man climbed out of the Pontiac..The fact that Barty saw twisty spots with either eye closed had prepared Agnes for this bleak news. Yet in spite of the defense that foreknowledge provided her, the teeth of sorrow bit deep..What if the stubborn, selfish, greedy, grubbing, vicious, psychotic, evil spirit of Thomas Vanadium, which had earlier pursued Junior through another alleyway in broad daylight, had followed him into this one in the more ghost-friendly hours of the night, and what if that spirit were standing just outside the Dumpster right now, and what if it closed the bifurcated lid and slipped a bolt through the latch rings, and what if Junior were trapped here with the thoroughly strangled corpse of Neddy Gnathic, and what if the flashlight failed when he tried to switch it on again, and then what if in the pitch-blackness he heard Neddy say, "Does anyone have a special request?"..He had already reviewed twenty-four thousand names, finding no Bartholomew, putting red checks beside entries with the initial B instead of a first name. A slip of yellow paper marked his place..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..Agnes Lampion would enthrall them, for hers was a life of clear significance. That they seemed equally interested in Paul's story, however, surprised him. Perhaps they were merely being kind, and yet with apparent fascination, they drew out of him so many details of his long walks, of the places he had been and the reasons why, of his life with Perri..Worse than the tenderness in the bones, the bleeding gums, the headaches, the ugly bruises, worse than the anemia-related weariness and the spells of breathlessness, was the suffering that her battle caused to those whom she loved. More frequently as the days passed, they were unable to conceal their worry and their sorrow. She held their hands when they trembled. She asked them to pray with her when they expressed anger that this should happen to her-of all people, to her, and she wouldn't let them go until the anger was gone. More than once, she pulled sweet Angel into her lap, stroked her hair, and soothed her with talk of all the good times shared in better days. And always Barty, watching over her in his blindness, aware that she would not be dying in all the places where she was, but taking no consolation from the fact that she would continue to exist in other worlds where he could never again be at her side..Murmuring

on the edge of sleep, Barty spoke to his father in all the places where Joey still lived: "Good-night, Daddy." Deciduous black oaks lined the street. All were leafless at this time of year, gnarled limbs clawing at the moon. 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. madness or a brilliant deductive insight: Naomi, the hateful bitch, she poisoned me!. The 9-mm pistol and the ammunition were on the foyer table. With trembling hands, Junior tore open the boxes and loaded the gun. At the beginning of his third month, instead of at the end of his fifth, he was combining vowels and consonants: "ba-ba-ba, ga-ga-ga, la-la-la, ca-ca-ca." "Don't worry," Celestina told him, "after what we've seen this past week, we're still with you." The popeyed little toad smirked over there on the far side of his pretentious desk. Junior's agony might have made him howl like a cankered dog or might even have dropped him to his knees if he hadn't used the pain to fuel his anger. His knobby countenance was so sensitive that the light breeze flailed his skin as cruelly as if it had been a barbed lash. Empowered by rage even more beautiful than his countenance was monstrous, he crossed the parking lot, looking through car windows in the hope of seeing keys dangling from an ignition. Strangely, as sometimes happened in this room, his missing toe itched. There was no point in removing his shoe and sock to scratch the stump, because that would provide no relief. Curiously, the itch was in the phantom toe itself, where it could never be scratched. Evidently, last evening, prior to keeping a dinner date with Victoria, when the taunting detective had illegally entered Junior's house and placed another quarter on the nightstand, he had seen the directory open on the kitchen table. Deducing the meaning of the red check marks, he inserted this card and closed the book: another small assault in the psychological warfare that he'd been waging. Sitting on a stool at the counter, he ordered a cheeseburger, coleslaw, french fries, and a cherry Coke. "Because He didn't want you to be a dog." She finished tying a bow in the drawstrings. "There. You look just like an M&M." IN HOSPITALS, AS in farmhouses, breakfast comes soon after dawn, because both healing and growing are hard work, and long days of labor required to save the human species, which spends as much time earning its pain and hunger as it does trying to escape them. As woe begone a widower as anyone could expect, Junior spent every night home alone. By Sunday, he'd slept without companionship eight nights since being discharged from the hospital. "Wally gave her tests. She's got an exceptional understanding of color, spatial relationships, and geometric forms for a child her age. She may be a visual prodigy." 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." In Oregon, standing at Junior Cain's bedside, turning a quarter across the knuckles of his left hand, Thomas Vanadium asks about the name that his suspect had spoken in the grip of a nightmare. Cradling the baby, the nun turned with it to Celestina, folding back a thin blanket to present her with a good look at the tiny girl. After wiping her floury hands, Agnes took the book from him and, examining it, could find nothing wrong. She flipped back a few pages, then a few forward, but the lines of type were crisp and clear. "Show me where, honey." Ashamed and scared, she told no one. Although a victim, she blamed herself, and the prospect of being exposed to ridicule so horrified her that despair got the better of good judgment. He sat on the edge of the bed and held her right hand. She had passed away such a short time ago that her skin was still warm. "I get peed off, and I miss some things terrible. But I'm not sad. And you've got to not be sad, either, 'cause it spoils everything." Agnes rubbed noses with him again, kissed him, and rose from the edge of the bed. "Take care he doesn't turn your belt on you with a spell!" said his uncle. Junior assumed the dead girl had come from a family of stature in the Negro community, which would explain the stonecarver's accelerated service. Vanadium, according to his own words, was a friend of the family; consequently, the father was most likely a police officer. "Naomi--she popped out of my oven twenty years ago, not out of yours," Sheena continued in a fierce whisper. "If anyone's suffering here, it's me, not you. Who're you, anyway? Some guy who's been boinking her for a couple years, that's all you are. I'm her mother. You can never know my pain. And if you don't stand with this family to make these wankers pay up big-time, I'll personally cut your balls off while you're sleeping and feed them to my cat." 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. Even someone of saintly habits and selfless behavior might be a monster in his heart, filled with unspeakable desires, which he might act upon only once or never. He exploded off Renee with the velocity of high-powered rifle fire. Stunned, disgusted, humiliated, he backed away from the chaise lounge, spluttering, wiping at his mouth, cursing. The sidewalks were crowded with businessmen in suits, hippies in flamboyant garb, groups of smartly attired suburban ladies in town to shop, and the usual forgettably dressed rabble, some smiling and some surly and some mumbling but as blank-eyed as mannequins, who might be hired assassins or poets, for all he knew, eccentric millionaires in mufti or carnival geeks who earned their living by biting heads off live chickens. During this same period, having subscribed to the opera, Junior attended a performance of Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. A deep storm of silence, anti-thunder, the house fully drenched in a muffling rain of soundlessness. The round table seated six, but they required only three chairs, because the two brainless friends were a pair of Angel's dolls. "In addition," Daines said, "her pelvis is small, which would present problems of delivery even in an ordinary pregnancy. And the muscle fibers in the central canal of her cervix, which ought to be softening in anticipation of labor, are still tough. I don't believe the cervix will dilate well enough to facilitate birth." PUDDLED ON THE pan-flat face, the port-wine birthmark. In the center of the stain, the closed eye, concealed by a purple lid, as smooth and round as a grape. He hadn't seen Thomas Vanadium since Monday, at the cemetery, and Vanadium hadn't pulled any tricks since leaving twenty-five cents at his bedside that same night. Almost four

days undisturbed by the hectoring detective. In matters Vanadium, however, Junior had learned to be wary, prudent..This was one of many things about Agnes that amazed Edom. If he had dared to make a list of all the qualities that he admired in her, he would have sunk into despair at the consideration of how much better she had coped with adversity than either he or Jacob..tasteful hint of it was on display; nothing about this beauty could be called cheap.. "Can't pay us as well as Losen does. But we could live," Otter argued..Having arrived at this same astonishing but nonetheless obvious conclusion, Harrison said, "Someone has to've been hurt." He hurried out of the kitchen, through the dining room, with Paul close behind him..Ministering to Perri, Joshua had pulled back her blankets. The fabric of the pale yellow pajama pants couldn't disguise how terribly withered her legs were: two sticks..Holding the mug in his right hand, Tom picked up the coin and rolled it across the knuckles of his left. Paul's quarter, after all. A two-bit temptation to panic. As gifted with physical grace as with good looks, Junior stepped into the bedroom doorway, lithely and with feline stealth. He leaned against the jamb..Alarmed, concerned that his patient's emotional reaction would lead to racking sobs, which in turn might stimulate abdominal spasms and renewed vomiting, Parkhurst called for a nurse and prescribed the immediate administration of diazepam..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..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.. "I'm interested in one of the smaller Griskins," said Junior, managing to appear calm, although his mouth was dry with fear and his mind spun with crazy images of the maniac cop, dead and rotting but nevertheless lurching around San Francisco.. "Me too." He closed the ring box. Took a deep breath. Opened the box again. "Celestina, when I met you, my heart was beating but it was dead. It was cold inside me. I thought it would never be warm again, but because of you, it is. You have given my life back to me, and I want now to give my life to you. Will you marry me?".Barty had awakened able to read. On the page, lines of type no longer twisted under his gaze..Instead of gaping at her as though she had been possessed by an inarticulate demon, Wally urgently fumbled a small box out of his jacket pocket and blurted, "Will you marry me?".During the past week, Junior had undertaken quiet background research on the prestidigitator with a badge. The cop was unmarried. He lived alone, so this bold visit entailed no risk..Not every coincidence, however, has meaning. Toss a quarter one million times, roughly half a million heads will turn up, roughly the same number of tails. In the process, there will be instances when heads turn up thirty, forty, a hundred times in a row. This does not mean that destiny is at work or that God-choosing to be not merely his usual mysterious self but utterly inscrutable-is warning of Armageddon through the medium of the quarter; it means the laws of probability hold true only in the long run, and that short-run anomalies are meaningful solely to the gullible..He didn't pause to lock the house behind them. Bright Beach, in 1965, was as free of criminals as it was untroubled by lumbering brontosaurus..Eventually he approached the door between the dining room and the kitchen. He paused there, listening..LATE TUESDAY AFTERNOON in Bright Beach, as a darker blue and iridescent tide rolled across the sky, seagulls rowed toward their safe harbors, and on the land below, shadows that had been upright at work all day now stretched out, recumbent, preparing for the night..He wanted, all right, but -intuition warned him that he ought to continue to be discreet for a while longer..On December 18, as the Beatles' "Hello Goodbye" rocketed up the charts, Junior boiled over with frustration at his inability to find either love or Seraphim's baby, so he drove across the Golden Gate Bridge, to Marin County and all the way to the town of Terra Linda, where he killed Bartholomew Prosser..First, Victoria Bressler was listed as one of his victims, although as far as he knew, the authorities still had every reason to attribute her murder to Vanadium.. "Guilt," said the detective. "If he killed her, wouldn't an overwhelming sense of guilt be as likely as anguish to cause acute nervous emesis?".His leonine head and bold features, framed by golden hair, should have conveyed strength, but the impression he might have made was compromised by a fringe of bangs that curled across his forehead, a style unfortunately reminiscent of effete emperors of ancient Rome..By the time he got back to Spruce Hills, the early night had fallen. The pearly, waxing moon floated over a town that glimmered mysteriously among its richness of trees, flickering and shimmering as though it were not a real town, but a dreamland where a multitude of Gypsy clans gathered by the lambent amber light of lanterns and campfires..He had sworn this vow before. An argument could be made that he had broken it..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..Grimacing, she said, "I told the police about your disgusting little come--on with the ice spoon." "Well, maybe you're right," Bellini said somewhat acerbically, before departing, "but then you've had the advantage of an illegal search, while I'm hampered by such niceties as warrants." Putting one hand on the object to which she referred, Barty said, "Mom and I were listening to a book when you got here. This is a talking book." Assuming that the boy had closed his eyes and was talking to himself, somewhere between his self-told bedtime story and a dream, Agnes retreated from the room, pulling the door only half shut behind her..Indeed, as Celestina and the kid reached the foot of the steps to this second house, Bartholomew pointed, and the woman turned to look back. She appeared to stare straight at the Mercedes, though the fog made it impossible for Junior to be sure..around a long time yet, but women outlive men by several years. Actuarial tables aren't wrong." Behind the dog, Mary walked out of nowhere, ball in hand, and Koko whirled in surprise, and the chase was on again.. "She was a hero, just like you. I wanted you ... I wanted you to see her and to know her name. Perri Damascus. That was her name." Now he shuffled the first of the four decks precisely as he had shuffled the first deck on Friday evening, and he set it aside..Celestina met them at the front door and flung her arms around Wally. He let go of his cane-Tom caught it-and returned her embrace with such ardor, kissed her so hard, that evidently residual weakness was no longer a problem.. "Fifty died in London, in '57, when two trains crashed. And a hundred twelve were crushed, torn,

mangled, in '52, also England." During Barty's hospitalization, they had graduated from the young adult novels by Robert Heinlein to some of the same author's science fiction for general audiences. Now, pajamaed and in bed, with his sunglasses on the nightstand but his padded eye patches still in place, Barty listened, rapt, to the beginning of Double Star. Enigmatic as ever on this subject, he continued: "I'm probably not blind more places than I am. Yeah, sure, I'd rather be me in one of the other places where my eyes are good, but this is the me I am. And you know what?" Barty, didn't watch much television. He'd been up late enough to see Red Skelton only a few times, but that comedian always drew gales of laughter from him. Rising from his chair and rolling down his shirt-sleeves, Nolly said, "If you'll be our guest for dinner, I suspect we'll all have a fascinating evenings." "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." "Sitters. Friends, relatives of friends. People I can trust. I can afford sitters if I'm getting only dinner tips." After staring at the coins for a long moment, Kathleen said, "I don't think any mystery writer has ever done a series of novels about a priest detective who's also a magician." Each booth was at a large window, and each window provided a view of the street. Vanadium wasn't out there, watching from the sidewalk, either: no glimpse of his pan-flat face shining in the December sun. Reverend White's murder received significant coverage throughout the nation, especially in West Coast papers, because of its perceived racial motivation and because it involved the burning of a parsonage. Junior opened his eyes and saw that only the second of the two rounds had found its intended mark. The first had cracked through the center of a cabinet door, surely shattering dishes within. This unflinching consistency of packaging enables card mechanics, professional gamblers, sleight-of-hand magicians-to manipulate a new deck with confidence that they know, starting, where every card can be found in the stack. An expert mechanic with practiced and dexterous hands can appear to shuffle so thoroughly that even the most suspicious observer will be satisfied-yet he will still know exactly where every card is located in the deck. With masterly manipulation, he can place the cards in the order that he wishes, to achieve whatever effect he desires. 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. His words echoed back to her from July: My cold's just here, not every place I am. If killing the wrong Bartholomew had broken a dam in Junior and released a lake of tension, whacking the right Bartholomew would set loose an ocean of pent-up stress, and he would feel free as he'd not felt since the fire tower. Freer than he'd been in his entire life. Thunder less distant now. Around her-the crackle of police radios, the clang of tools being readied, the skirl of a stiffening wind. Dizzying, these sounds. She couldn't shut her ears against them, and when she closed her eyes, she felt as though she were spinning. Turning his patched eyes in the general direction of his mother, Barty said, "Oops." During the past three years, he'd suffered much because of these sisters, including most recently the humiliation in the Dumpster with the dead musician, Celestina's pencil-necked friend with a propensity for postmortem licking. The memory of that horror flared so vividly-every grotesque detail condensed into one intense and devastating flash of recollection-that Junior's bladder suddenly felt swollen and full, although he had taken a long satisfying leak in an alleyway across the street from the restaurant at which the postcard-painting poseur had enjoyed a leisurely dinner with Ichabod. Although he harbored no fear of coming under suspicion for the murder of Victoria Bressler, he intended to leave Spruce Hills this very night. No future existed for him in such a sleepy backwater. A wider world awaited, and he had earned the right to enjoy all that it could offer him. As the nurse slapped a bar of lye soap in Celestina's right hand, she turned on the water in the sink. Because his lacrimal glands and tear ducts were intact, Barty could cry with his plastic eyes. Consequently, it didn't seem all that much more incredible to be seeing with them. The floor of the spacious bathroom featured beige marble tiles with diamond-shaped inlays of black granite. The countertop and the shower stall were fabricated from matching marble, and the same marble was employed in the wainscoting. "No, I didn't see him," Junior reminded the attorney. "I just assumed, when this harassment started here-". Those spike-sharp eyes, - tenpenny gray, nailed Junior to the bed, pinning him for scrutiny. With a nervous twitch of his avian head and a wary frown, the watcher broke eye contact and slipped into the chattering crowd, lost as quickly as a slender sandpiper skittering among a herd of plump seagulls. Dropped, the wineglass had shattered. But the bottle of Merlot had survived again, rolling across the vinyl-tile floor until it bumped gently against the base of a cabinet. Angel, on the window seat, wore nothing but white. White sneakers and socks. White pants. White T-shirt. Two white bows in her hair. Agnes ran to the kitchen, where she had been working when the doorbell rang, packing boxes of groceries to be delivered with the honey-raisin pear pies that she and Jacob had baked this morning. Dessert was on the house. The waiter brought the four best items on the menu, to spare them the need to make two small decisions after having made such a big one. "Bullpoo might not be what they say, but it's the worst that we say. And in fact, in this house, bulldoody is preferred." "I'll never forget it," Dr. Salk promised. With his attention still on Perri's pictures, he said, "But I'm afraid you give me far too much credit. I'm no superman. I didn't do the work alone. So many dedicated people were involved." Two soft-boiled eggs, one slice of bread neither toasted nor buttered, a glass of apple juice, and a dish of orange. To Dr. Parkhurst, Vanadium said, "In my work, I see lots of people who've just lost

loved ones. None of them has ever puked like Vesuvius." 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. The three adults exclaimed at the disappearance of the quarter, applauded again, and looked knowingly at Tom's hands, which had closed at the sudden conclusion of all the flourishes. Junior gave the Raisinets to him, and Google left the theater with his candy and his cash. IN GOOD DARK SUITS, clean-shaven, as polished as their shoes, carrying valises, the three arrived in Junior's hospital room even before the usual start of the working day, wise men without camels, not bearing gifts, but willing to pay a price for grief and loss. Two lawyers and a high-level political appointee, they represented the state, the county, and the insurance company in the matter of the improperly maintained railing on the observation platform at the fire tower. Not all of the pins were knocked to the shear line with a single pull of the trigger. Three pulls were the minimum required, sometimes as many as six, depending on the lock.

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