

## **LIGHT ON THE PATH AND KARMA**

Tom believed that the girl had an intuitive understanding of the true complexity of the world, but she was only three, after all, and neither ready nor able to absorb the scientific theory that supported her intuition. Tom Vanadium checked the small wastebasket next to the sink and discovered a wad of bloody Kleenex. The crumpled wrappers from two Band-Aids. 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. 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. Babies of unwed mothers-especially of dead unwed mothers, and especially of dead unwed mothers whose fathers were ministers unable to endure public mortification-were routinely put up for adoption. Since Seraphim had given birth here, the baby would be-no doubt already had been-adopted by a San Francisco-area family. In those days they had no fixed names for the various kinds and arts of magic, nor were the connections among those arts clear. There was-as the wise men of Roke would say later-no science in what they knew. But Hound knew pretty surely that his prisoner was concealing his talents. Everyone agreed, and the order was placed when their waiter brought appetizers: crab cakes for Nolly, scampi for Kathleen, and calamari for Tom. 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. "Consider what I told you," Dr. Salk urged. "Your Perri would want you to think about it." make a worrywart life-insurance salesman like me seem just as light hearted as a schoolgirl. And so at the age of thirty-one, after more than twenty-eight years of blindness with a few short reprieves, Barty Lampion received the gift of sight from his ten-year-old daughter. 1996 through 2000: Day after day, the work was done in memory of Agnes Lampion, Joey Lampion, Harrison White, Seraphim White, Jacob Isaacson, Simon Magusson, Tom Vanadium, Grace White, and most recently Wally Lipscomb, in memory of all those who had given so much and, though perhaps still alive in other places, were gone from here. "Your father denies the rape ever occurred, apparently out of what I'd call a misguided willingness to trust in divine justice." Martinis were ordered all around. None here observed a vow of absolute sobriety. As Tom reached Celestina, she said, "Shots." She said, "Gunshots." She held the receiver in one hand and pulled at her hair with the other, as if with the administration of a little pain, she might wake up from this nightmare. She said, "He's in Oregon." Sad symbols of a romance not meant to be, the red rose and the bottle of wine lay on the floor of the foyer. With the corpse gone, no signs of violence remained. "--and we're from different worlds, which I respect. I respect you and your wonderful family ... your centeredness, your certainty. I want to do this only because it's what I owe you." Celestina sensed an easy camaraderie between these two men, but also tension that was perhaps related to the reference to an illegal search. He preferred to venture inside the house while some lights remained on. He didn't want to be reduced to creeping stealthily in the dark through strange rooms: The very idea filled his guts with shiver chasing shiver. Never had the familiar red Bicycle design of the U.S. Playing Card Company looked ominous before, but it was fearsome now, as strange voodoo veve or satanic conjuration pattern. 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. Judging by the evidence, the nurse was home alone, but Junior raised his voice above the music and called out, "Hello? Is anyone here?" Although he had made no effort to summon them, tears spilled from Junior's closed eyes. They weren't drawn from him by thoughts of poor Naomi. These next few days-perhaps weeks-were going to be tedious, until he could have Nurse Victoria Bressler. Under the circumstances, he had good reason to feel sorry for himself. Opening his eyes blinking back his tears just as more agonizing contractions knotted his abdomen, he could see ribbons of red in the watery green mess that gushed from him. Bright red. Gastric blood would be dark. This must be pharyngeal blood. Unless an artery had ruptured in his stomach, torn by the incredible violence of these intransigent spasms, in which case he was puking his life away. Exactly. The shock. The devastating loss. Junior felt it now, anew, and was afraid he might betray himself with tears, although he seemed to be done with vomiting. "What was it like, Enoch? Did you look into her eyes when you pushed her?" Vanadium's uninflected monologue was like the voice of a conscience that preferred to torture by droning rather than by nagging. "Or doesn't a woman-killing coward like you have the guts for that?" The kids insisted on knowing what was meant by the line about the chicken, and this led to the laying of a coopful of Why-did-the chicken-cross-the-road jokes, which Edom and Jacob had memorized in childhood as an act of rebellion against their humorless father. His mother tried to explain. "It's as if you'd found some great jewel," she said, "and what's one of us to do with a diamond but hide it? Anybody rich enough to buy it from you is strong enough to kill you for it. Keep it hid. And keep away from great people and their crafty men!" murdered would be discounted. And if every death was suspicious to him, then he would quickly lose interest in Junior and move on to a new enthusiasm, harassing some other poor devil. By Thursday, September 23, due to Junior's accident and surgery, the draft board-which had reinstated his I -A status after he'd lost the exemption that had come with his former job as a rehabilitation therapist-agreed to schedule a new physical examination in December. Agnes remained mystified by this talk, but a week before, in the rain-swept cemetery, she had learned there was substance to it. Junior stalked her, but she eluded him. Always, the song seemed to arise from the next room, but when he passed through the doorway into that space, the voice then sounded as if it came from the room that he'd just left. A door slammed, and after the briefest of internal debates about whether to ize or

act, Junior left Ichabod straddling the threshold. He must get to Celestina before she reached a telephone, and then he could come back and finish moving the body..He groaned. "That just doesn't cut it, Mom. If I gotta be blind, I think I should get to say peed off."For an instant, she appeared to be frowning. Then he realized this couldn't be a frown. It must be a smoldering look of desire..If the sight of his daughter almost drove him to his knees, the sight of his wife, also his first in seven years, lifted him until he was virtually floating across the grass..Rowena loves you, Phimie had told him, briefly repressing the effects of her stroke to speak with clarity. Beezil and Feezil are safe with her Messages from his lost wife and children, where they waited for him beyond this life..From the chair in the corner, where Agnes sat, it seemed that Joshua took an inordinately long time on what was usually a quick examination. Worry so weighed on her that the physician's customary thoroughness seemed, this time, to be filled with dire meaning..In the faraway, at the limits of night and fog, the dog bit off his bark in expectation..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..His apartment, over the large garage, was reached by a set of exterior stairs. The space was divided into two rooms. The first was a combination living room and kitchenette, with a corner dining table seating two. Beyond was a small bedroom with adjoining bath.."I mean it. You have a lot of responsibilities here. Barty. Pie Lady Services. People who depend on you. Friends who love you. When you came on board with me, mister, you bought into a whole lot more than you can walk away from."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..Junior was vigilant. He took note of all those who approached the piano, whether they dropped money in the fishbowl or not..He warily surveyed those around him as he walked, and looked over his shoulder from time to time. On one of these backward glances, he was unnerved but not surprised to see Vanadium's specter..Celestina gave birth to Seraphim in '69, saw her painting on the cover of American Artist in '70, and gave birth to Harrison in '72.."Paul," she said, "you've got a lovely house, but Celestina and Grace are doers. They need to keep occupied. They'll go stir-crazy if they don't stay busy. Am I right, ladies?".Wally Lipscomb parked in his garage, switched off the engine, and started to get out of the Buick before he saw that Celestina had left her purse in the car..Agnes remembered the blood, the awful red flood. Excruciating pain and such fearsome crimson torrents. She'd thought her baby had entered the world stillborn on a tide of its own blood and hers..When Renee, sweetly oblivious of her looming doom, claimed to have inherited a sizable industrial-valve fortune, Junior thought she might be inventing the wealth or at least exaggerating to make herself more desirable. But when he accompanied her back to her place, he discovered a level of luxury that proved she wasn't a shop girl with fantasies..Darkness, the one source of childhood fear that most adults never quite outgrow, held no terror for Barty. Although for a while his bedroom featured a Mickey Mouse night-light, the miniature lamp was there not to soothe the boy, but to quiet his mother's nerves, because she worried about him waking alone, in blackness..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..Think, think. A three-minute drive to the Lampion place. Maybe two minutes, running stop signs, cutting corners.."At the back of the second gallery, on the left, there's a corridor. The rest rooms are at the end of it, beyond the offices."."Where's your mother this morning?" he asked, for he'd expected to have to shoot his way through a lot more than one adult to reach both children. The Lipscomb house had proved empty, however, and fortune had given him the boy and girl together, with one guardian..If he was left standing on the porch, the visitor would circle the house, peering in windows where the drapes were not drawn, trying the doors in hope of finding one unlocked. Fearful that Victoria was sick or injured, that perhaps she had slipped on a pat of butter and cracked her Mad against the corner of an open oven door, he might try to force his way inside, break a window. Certainly he would go to the neighbors to call the police..Between the one-line description of the baklava and the menu's more effusive words about the walnut mamouls, the suspense became too much, the doubt too insidious, at which point Celestina looked up and said, with more girlish angst in her voice than she had planned "Maybe this isn't the place, maybe it isn't the time, or maybe it's the time but not the place, or the place but not the time, or maybe the time and the place are right but the weather's wrong, I don't know--Oh,.Out of Phimie's humiliation, terror, suffering, and death had come Angel, whom Celestina had first and briefly hated, but whom now she loved more than she loved Wally, more than she loved herself or even life itself. Phimie, through Angel, had brought Celestina both to Wally and to a fuller understanding of their father's meaning when he spoke of this momentous day, an understanding that brought power to her painting and so deeply touched the people who saw and bought her art..Celestina didn't hear gunfire, but she couldn't mistake the bullets for anything else when they cracked through the door.."You'd never cheat me. I know you. We'd have Christmas twice a year and parties for half birthdays."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..Livor mortis had already set in, blood draining to the lowest points of her body, leaving the fronts of her bare legs, one side of each bare arm, and her face ghastly pale.."When you didn't answer the doorbell, man, I just knew what must have happened," Chicane told Junior..After a long time the door opened and several men came in. He could do nothing against them as they gagged him and bound his arms behind him. "Now you won't weave charms nor speak spells, young'un," said a broad, strong man with a furrowed face, "but you can nod

your head well enough, right? They sent you here as a dowser. If you're a good dowser you'll feed well and sleep easy. Cinnabar, that's what you're to nod for. The King's wizard says it's still here somewhere about these old mines. And he wants it. So it's best for us that we find it. Now I'll walk you out. It's like I'm the water finder and you're my wand, see? You lead on. And if you want to go this way or that way you dip your head, so. And when you know there's ore underfoot, you stamp on the place, so. Now that's the bargain, right? And if you play fair I will." The paramedic snatched the oxygen feed from his patient's nose and quickly elevated his head, providing a purge towel to catch the thin ejecta. In the morning, at breakfast, from this calmer perspective, he looked back at his tantrum in the middle of the night and wondered if he might be in psychological trouble. He decided not. In November and December, Junior studied arcane texts on the supernatural, went through new women at a pace prodigious even for him, found three Bartholomews, and finished ten needlepoint pillows. In her arms she held Bartholomew. The infant was not heavily bundled, for the weather was unseasonably mild. After the detective returned the box to the nightstand, the coin began to turn again. "When you called earlier in the year, to ask for a referral to a private investigator down there, the woman had recently turned up dead and Vanadium was gone, but no one put the two together at first." "Even in an infinite number of worlds," Wally objected, "there's no place I was that stupid." At the head of the line, Paul waved a red handkerchief out of the window of the station wagon. Grace knew it, too, because she went limp with misery in his arms, ceased struggling against him. Shivering, Junior slammed the trunk lid and warily surveyed the lonely landscape. Black pines spread bristled arms through the chary night, and the moon cast down a jaundiced light that seemed to obscure more than it illuminated. In the noble ruin of his face, Thomas Vanadium's smoke-gray eyes were striking, filled with a beautiful ... sorrow. Not self-pity. He clearly didn't regard himself as a victim. This, Kathleen felt, was the sorrow of a man who had seen too much of the suffering of others, who knew the evil ways of the world. These were eyes that read you at a glance, that shone with compassion if you deserved it, and that glared with a terrifying judgment if compassion wasn't warranted. From the corner armchair, as if he could see so well in the dark that he knew Junior's eyes were open, Detective Thomas Vanadium said, "Did you hear my entire conversation with Dr. Parkhurst?" 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. "I know Edom and Jacob have been a burden," said Vinnie, "you having to be responsible for them-". Before he searched the bedroom, Vanadium walked quickly back through the rooms that he had already inspected, suddenly remembering the three bizarre paintings of which Nolly, Kathleen, and Sparky had spoken, and wondering how he could have overlooked them. They were not here. He was able to locate, however, the places on the walls where the art works had hung, because the nails still bristled from the pocket plaster, and picture hooks dangled from the nails. Her case of polio had been so severe that braces and crutches were never an option. Muscle rehabilitation had been ineffective. twenty-eight pounds. Typically, seven to eight pounds of this is the fetus. The placenta and the amniotic fluid weigh three pounds. The remaining eighteen are due to water retention and fat stores. Junior considered leaving before Vanadium still seventy-five yards away arrived. He was afraid he would appear to be fleeing. If they were suspicious of him, they showed no obvious alarm. The three went inside in no particular rush, and judging by their demeanor, Junior decided that they hadn't spotted him, after all. Tom himself had decided to build a new life here, as well, assisting Agnes with her ever-expanding work. He was not yet sure whether this would include the rededication to his vows and a return to the Roman collar, or whether he would spend the rest of his days in civvies. He was delaying that decision until the Cain case was resolved. That same day, he dared to visit two galleries. Neither of them had a pewter candlestick on display. So it became dangerous to practice sorcery, except under the protection of a strong warlord; and even then, if a wizard met up with one whose powers were greater than his own, he might be destroyed. And if a wizard let down his guard among the common folk, they too might destroy him if they could, seeing him as the source of the worst evils they suffered, a malign being. In those years, in the minds of most people, all magic was black. As Wally got behind the wheel and closed his door, Angel said, "Mommy, where's fog come from? And don't say Hawaii." Kathleen watched him with obvious amusement, aware that he was savoring her suspense as much as he was the appetizer. hands as she had seen surgeons do in movies, and she could almost believe that she was still at home, in bed, in the fevered throes of a terrible dream. Celestina threw down the weapon even before she turned, and as two cops entered the room, she cried, "He's getting away!". At the stream Serrenen, where it runs within the north wall of the city, the midwife gave Otter his true name, by which he is remembered in islands far from Havnor. The odds against this phenomenal eleven-card draw must be millions to one, which seemed to give the predictions validity. As if he'd been presented with many previous photos under these circumstances, Jonas Salk accepted the picture. "Your daughter?" the hilly streets of the city, ignoring all traffic lights and stop signs, pegging the speedometer needle at its highest mark, as though he might eventually be air-cooled by sufficient speed. He wanted to slam through unwary pedestrians, crack their bones, and send them tumbling. When the sound-suppressor was properly attached to the pistol, Junior Cain leaned closer to the girl, peered into her eyes, and whispered, "Naomi, are you in there?" Near the top of the stairs, Barty thought he heard voices in his bedroom. Soft and indistinct. When he stopped to listen, the voices fell silent, or maybe he only imagined them. Clutching the red rose in his left hand, the brightly wrapped gift box half crushed in his right, Thomas Vanadium lay at Junior's mercy, with no tricks to perform, no quarter to set dancing across his knuckles. Junior discovered more tears than could have been found in ten thousand onions. His wife and his unborn baby. He had been willing to sacrifice his beloved Naomi, but maybe he would have found the cost too high if he had known that he was also sacrificing his first-conceived child. This was too much. He was bereft. Before he taught himself to read books, he also taught himself numbers, and then how to read a clock. The significance of time had a more profound impact on him than Agnes could understand, perhaps

because acquiring an awareness of the infinite nature of the universe and the finite nature of each human life-and fully understanding the implications of this knowledge-takes most of us till early adulthood if not later, whereas for Barty, the vast glories of the universe and the comparatively humble nature of human existence were recognized, contemplated, and absorbed in a matter of weeks..The lid of the cooler wasn't on as tight as it ought to have been. From around one edge slipped a thin and sinuous stream of smoke. Something on fire..Halted by the unmistakable meaning of the expressions on these women's faces, Paul was grateful that Nellie was briefly stricken mute. He didn't believe he had the strength to receive the news that she had tried to deliver..He stood at a window, staring down into the street, his profile to her, and in his silence he searched for the words to describe the "something extraordinary" that he had mentioned earlier..In a red coat with a red hood, Bartholomew appeared first in the arms of the tall lanky man, the Ichabod Crane look-alike, who also had a large tote bag hanging from his shoulder..Aftermath had a way of being discovered, often at the worst of all possible moments, which he had learned from movies and from crime stories in the media and even from personal experience. Discovery always brought the police at high speed, sounding their sirens and full of enthusiasm, because those bastards were the most past-focused losers on the face of the earth, utterly consumed by their interest in aftermath.. "That would be John George Haigh," Agnes said, checking Barty's diaper before nestling him tenderly in the crook of her arm.

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