

A CHRISTMAS MASQUERADE

Then the police in Spruce Hills would want to know why he had been screwing around with an underage Negro girl if his marriage to Naomi had been as perfect, as fulfilling, as he claimed. Unfair as it seems, there is no statute of limitations on murder. Closed files can be dusted off and opened again; investigations can be resumed. And although authorities would have little or no hope of convicting him of murder on whatever meager evidence they could dig up, he would be forced to spend another significant portion of his fortune on attorney fees..Edom had noticed them earlier. Now he saw they were in worse condition than he'd thought. Enlarged knuckles, fingers not entirely at natural angles to one another. Perhaps Obadiah had rheumatoid arthritis, like Bill Kleifton, though a less crippling case..Celestina slammed the door, pressed the lock button in the knob, shoved-rocked-muscled the dresser in front of the door, astonished by her own strength, and heard Angel speaking into the phone: "Mommy's moving furniture.".They lived too far from the nearest railroad tracks. He could not rationally expect a derailed train to crash through the garage.. "Yes. In syrup form. It's a good item for your home medicine chest, in case your child ever swallows poison and you need to purge it from him quickly.". "We don't sell no pizza," Angel said, because lately they had received a few calls for a new pizzeria with a phone number one digit different from theirs..He hurt too much to recover quickly and take advantage of the woman's brief vulnerability. Clambering to his feet, he backed away from her and fumbled in a pocket for spare cartridges..At the end, with the salt Tom and the pepper Tom standing side by side in their different but parallel worlds, Maria said, "Seems like science fiction.".He stepped into the house, quietly closed the front door, and examined the bottle. The glass was thick, especially at the base, where a large punt--a deep indentation--encouraged sediment to gather along the rim rather than across the entire bottom of the bottle. This design feature secondarily contributed to the strength of the container. Evidently he had hit her with the bottom third of the bottle, which could most easily withstand the blow..If magic explained the jacks on Friday evening, maybe it was the dark variety of magic. Maybe he shouldn't be endeavoring to summon, once more, whatever spirit was responsible for the four knaves..As they moved around the base of the oak from one vantage point to another, people stopped by to reassure Agnes, although never with a word, as though to speak would be to jinx the climb. Maria placed a hand on her arm, squeezed gently. Celestina briefly massaged the nape of her neck. Edom gave her a quick hug. Grace slipped an arm around her waist for a moment. Wally with a smile and a thumbs-up sign. Tom Vanadium, thumb and forefinger in a confident OK. Lookin' good. Hang in there. Signs and gestures, maybe because they didn't want her to hear the quivers and catches in their voices..Though she was only a week past her third birthday, Angel always selected her own clothes and carefully dressed herself. Usually she preferred monochromatic outfits, sometimes with a single accent color expressed only in a belt or a hat, or a scarf. When she mixed several colors, the initial impression that she gave was of chromatic chaos-but on second look, you began to see that these unlikely combinations were more harmonious than they had first seemed..Barty whispered: "The North Pole Society of Not Evil Adventurers is now in session.".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..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..Instead, trying not to let Barty see the depth of her concern, she told him to get his jacket from the front closet, and she got hers, and leaving the buttermilk-raisin pies unfinished, she drove him to the doctor's office, because he was her reason to breathe, the engine of her heart, her hope and joy, her everlasting bond to her lost husband. Dr. Joshua Nunn was only forty-eight, but he had appeared grandfatherly since Agnes had first gone to him as a patient after the death of her father, more than ten years ago. His hair turned pure white before he was thirty. Every day off, he either worked assiduously on his twenty-foot sportfisher, Hippocratic Boat, which he scraped and painted and polished and repaired with his own hands, or puttered around Bright Bay in it, fishing as though the fate of his soul depended on the size of his catch; consequently, he spent so much time in the salt air and sun that his perpetually tan face was well-wizened at the corners of his eyes and as appealingly creased as that of the best of grandfathers. Joshua applied the same diligence to the preservation of a round belly and a second chin that he brought to the maintenance of his boat, and considering his wire-rimmed eyeglasses and bow tie and suspenders and the elbow patches on his jacket, he seemed to have intentionally sculpted his physical appearance to put his patients at ease, as surely as he had selected his wardrobe for the same purpose..The paramedic pumped the inflation cuff of the sphygmomanometer, and Junior's blood pressure was most likely high enough to induce a stroke, driven skyward by the thought that Naomi's love had been a lie..And so Agnes went alone to her bedroom and there, as on so many nights, sought the solace of the rock who was also her lamp, of the lamp who was also her high fortress, of the fortress who was also her shepherd. She asked for mercy, and if mercy was not to be granted, she asked for the wisdom to understand the purpose of her sweet boy's suffering.. "Me, me," Celestina said. "In fact, fianc?es should come first.".The wedding reception-big, noisy, and joyous--spread across the three properties without fences. His mother's name was so often mentioned, her presence so strongly felt in all the lives that she had touched, that sometimes it seemed that she was actually there with them..Although her hands were shaking and her knees felt as though they might buckle, Agnes lifted two pies off the table..Now that neither of them had a doubt that the other shared the same need and that eventually they would satisfy each other, Victoria was opting for discretion. Wise woman..His entire body throbbed from his neck to the tips of his nine toes. His legs were the worst, filled with hot twisting agony..Celestina looked out a kitchen window and saw Agnes in the Lampion driveway, where the three-vehicle caravan was assembled. She was loading her station wagon..She shook her head, and red bows fluttered. "No. 'Cause you didn't just move it

around." 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..Clearly touched and intrigued, the magician nevertheless circled the offer in search of reasons to decline, before at last shaking his head sadly. "I doubt that I'm the caliber of person you're looking for, Mrs. Lampion. I wouldn't be entirely a credit to your project." "Yes, I was." She didn't tell him that her fear had not been allayed by his assurances or by his second walk in the rain..With the dead woman's guest on the way, minutes were precious. Attention to detail was essential, however, regardless of how much time was required to properly stage the little tableau that might disguise murder as a domestic accident..In the crisis, the rack holding her oxygen bottle had been rolled to the bed. The breathing mask lay on the pillow beside her..Edom drove, happy to assist Agnes. He was happier still that he didn't have to make the pie deliveries alone..which was tied a gift tag bearing a hand-printed message: With our compliments. Thanks for your business..Carrying him to the window, gazing up at the stars, the moon, she said, "I'll always read to you, Barty."..Agnes had struggled recently to find a way to explain to Barty that his uncles had lost their hope, to convey also what it meant to live without hope-and somehow to tell the boy all this without burdening him, at such a young age, with the details of what his monstrous grandfather, Agnes's father, had done to her and to her brothers. The task was beyond her abilities. The fact that Barty was a prodigy six times over didn't make his mother's work easier, because in order to understand her, he would require experience and emotional maturity, not just intellect..Tom caused less of a stir in the restaurant than Kathleen had expected. Other diners noticed him, of course, but after one or two looks of shock or pity, they appeared indifferent, though this was undoubtedly the thinnest pretense of indifference. The same quality in him that elicited deferential regard from the waiter apparently ensured that others would be courteous enough to respect his privacy..By habit, she shifted her attention to his eyes, because though the scientific types insist that the eyes themselves are incapable of expression, Agnes knew what every poet knows: To see the condition of the hidden heart, you must look first where scientists will not admit to looking at all..He was about to lift the body out of the chair when he heard the car in the driveway. He might not have caught the sound of the engine so distinctly and so early if the stereo had not been in the process of changing albums..Nicholas Deed was not the knave. He had already brought all the ruin into their lives that he was going to bring..He had sworn this vow before. An argument could be made that he had broken it..A nurse in surgical greens appeared. "Pull up the sleeves of your scrub nearly to your elbows. Scrub hard. I'll tell you when to stop."..Instead, he encountered an elderly woman getting out of a red Pontiac with a fox tail tied to the radio antenna. A quick glance around confirmed that they were unobserved, so he clubbed her on the back of the head with the butt of his 9-mm pistol..being careful to place the point of impact precisely where the bottle had struck her..The sight of her sister's blood and the persistence of the flow made Celestina weak with apprehension. She was afraid she had done the wrong thing by delaying hospitalization..At the next comer, instead of continuing south, Junior angled aggressively in front of oncoming pedestrians, stepped off the curb, and headed east, traversing the, intersection against the advice of a Don't Walk sign. Horns blared, a city bus nearly flattened him, but he made..Returning to his apartment, Edom had to pass under the limbs of the majestically crowned oak that dominated the deep yard between the house and the garage..Seeing her, Joey leaped up front his armchair again. He managed to hold on to his book this time, but he stumbled into the footstool and nearly lost his balance..Sometimes Celestina marveled at how intimately and inextricably the tendrils of tragedy and joy were intertwined in the vine of life. Sorrow was often the root of future joy, and joy could be the seed of sorrow yet to come. The layered patterns in the vine were so complex, so enrapturing in their lush detail and so fearsome in their wild inevitability, that she could fill uncountable canvases, through many lifetimes as an artist, striving to capture the enigmatic nature of existence, in all its beauty dark and bright, and in the end merely suggest the palest shadow of its mystery..EDOM AND THE PIES, into the blue morning following the storm, had a schedule to keep and the hungry to satisfy..This surprised him. Of course, Oregon was not the Deep South. It was a progressive state. Nevertheless, he was surprised. Oregon wasn't home to many Negroes, either, a handful compared to those in other states, and yet until now Junior supposed that they had their own cemeteries..Still seeking some missing fact, some insight that would help him understand the maniac's Bartholomew obsession, Tom asked more questions until Celestina suddenly realized and revealed what might be the information that he sought: Cain's perverse insistence on playing the reverend's taped rough draft of "This Momentous Day" throughout his long assault on her sister..He tried to lean back as he dropped, with the hope that he would fall under her, providing cushion if they met with sidewalk instead of lawn..She told him to stay on the line, stay on no matter what, told him to keep talking to her, and he hung up..This time, he vowed never to kill again, except in self-defense, regardless of the provocation. This tougher condition pleased him. No one achieved significant self-improvement by setting low standards for himself..So many stops, too little time at each, a dazzle of Christmas trees decorated every one to a different taste, offers of butter cookies and hot chocolate or lemon crisps and eggnog, morning chats in bright kitchens steeped in wonderful cooking odors and-in the chillier afternoon good wishes exchanged in front of hearth fires, gifts accepted as well as given, cookies taken in trade for pecan cakes, "Silver Bells" and "Hark How the Bells" and "Jingle-Bell Rock" on the radio: Therewith they arrived at three o'clock in the afternoon, Christmas Eve, their deliveries completed before Santa's had begun..Seraphim White had come to California to give birth to him in or to spare her parents-and their congregation--embarrassment..You struck a discord that can he heard, however faintly, all the way to the farthest end of the universe.....Eye to eye with Tom, Celestina herself did some clear-seeing. "You're special, too, in lots of obvious ways. But like Angel, you're special in some secret way ... aren't you?" "Well, Uncle Jacob doesn't understand kids. Anyway, this is pretty good stuff."..Sweaty, chilled, trembling, weak-kneed, watery-eyed with self-pity, Junior spread a plastic garbage bag on the driver's seat. He got in the Suburban, twisted the key in the ignition, and

groaned as the engine vibrations threatened to undo him.. "He's blind, sure, but he's also a boy," Angel said, "and trees are something that boys gotta do." Rubbermaid container from his own pantry. Junior would never again use it to store leftover soup.. "July 6, 1944, in Hartford, Connecticut, a fire broke out in the great tent of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus at two-forty in the afternoon, while six thousand patrons watched the Wallendas, a world-famous high-wire troupe, ascend to begin their act. By three o'clock, the fire burned out, following the collapse of the flaming tent, leaving one hundred sixty-eight dead. Another five hundred people were badly injured, but one thousand circus animals-including forty lions and forty elephants-were not harmed." "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." Rising, Celestina said to Tom, "Last Tuesday night, we had to switch on the lawn sprinklers. This will be much better." Alone with Paul, as he stood abashed, she removed her blouse and bra and, with arms crossed over her breasts, revealed to him her savaged back. Whereas her father had used open-hand slaps and hard fists to teach his twin sons the lessons of God, he preferred canes and lashes as the instruments of education for his daughter, because he believed that his direct touch might have invited sin. Scars disfigured Agnes from shoulders to buttocks, pale scars and others dark, crosshatched and whorled.. Because he kept imagining the stealthy sounds of a dead cop rising in vengeance behind him, Junior switched on the radio. He tuned in a station featuring a Top 40 countdown.. In spite of his dumpy appearance-and especially in the dark, where appearances didn't count-Vanadium had the aura of a mystic. Although Junior didn't believe in mystics or in the various unearthly powers they claimed to possess, he knew that mystics who believed in themselves were exceptionally dangerous people.. Junior Cain felt as if his heart had been lanced by a needle so thin that the muscle still contracted rhythmically but painfully around it. She did? She. . . she wrote that?" "They've gone to bed. They're tired," Wally told her as he put the car in gear and released the hand brake. "Aren't you?" Agnes found herself drifting up. A frightening sense of weightlessness overcame her.. A quick tug on each pants cuff revealed no ankle holster, which was how many cops would choose to carry an off-duty piece.. She traded silence for silence. Then: "Kiddo, I'm still totally confused by this stuff." Reluctant to leave Joey's body with the oddly jumpy mortician, Jacob nevertheless crossed the porch of the Victorian style funeral home and left without glancing back. He walked one mile home, alert to passing traffic, especially cautious at intersections.. "Better. Fear doesn't require him even to seduce a woman or to buy a bottle of whiskey. He just needs to open himself to it, and he will be filled like a glass under a faucet. As difficult as this may be to comprehend, Cain would choose to be neck-deep in a bottomless pool of terror, desperately trying to stay afloat, rather than to suffer that unrelieved hollowness. Fear can give shape and meaning to his life, and I intend not merely to fill him with fear but to drown him in it." "Our new roof," Bill said, pointing overhead, "will hold through any hurricane. Fine work. You tell Agnes what fine." Apple juice, lime Jell-O, and four soda crackers," said the detective. "If you don't have enough of a conscience to make you confess, THIS IS THE FIRST PAGE of the Book of the Dark, written some six hundred years ago in Berila, on Enlad.. Tom had no idea who Perri might be, but something in the way Grace asked the question and the way she regarded Paul suggested that she knew something about Perri that had won her deep respect and admiration.. With Naomi, sex had been glorious, because they were bonded on multiple levels, all deeper than the mere physical. They had been so close, so emotionally and intellectually entwined, that in making love to her, he'd been making love to himself; and he would never experience a greater intimacy than that.. Around the dinner table, the adults applauded, but the tougher audience squinted at the ceiling, toward which she believed the coin had arced, then at the table, where it ought to have fallen among the water glasses or in her creamed corn. At last she looked at Tom and said, "Not magic." 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.. Barty never cried. In the hospital neonatal unit, he'd been a marvel to the nurses, because when the other newborns were squalling in chorus, Barty had been unfailingly serene.. As Obadiah lowered himself into a well-worn armchair, he said to Edom, "Son, don't I know you from somewhere?" 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.. Indeed, she found it difficult to talk with her son in their usual easy way. She heard a stiffness in her voice that she knew would sooner or later be apparent to him.. After a surgeon had lanced fifty-four boils and cut the cores from the thirty-one most intractable (shaving the patient's head to get at the twelve that were festering on his scalp), and after three days of hospitalization to guard against staphylococcus infection, and after he had been turned back into the world as bald as Daddy Warbucks and with the promise of permanent scarring, Junior visited the Reno library to catch up with current events.. The paper towels were spotted with butter. He crumpled them and threw them in the trash.. 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.. Her hands trembled as she attempted to fold her sister's clothes into the small suitcase. What should have been a simple task became a daunting challenge; the fabric seemed to come alive in her hands and slip through her fingers, resisting every attempt to organize it. When eventually she realized there was no reason to be neat, she tossed the garments into the bag without concern for wrinkling them.. ready to hear me. However long you need. But something ... something extraordinary happened here before you arrived." "Sure. There's lots of places where he didn't get shot, but there's places where he got shot and died, too." The physician saw the look and understood it. A blush pinked his long, pale face. "Celestina, you're quite beautiful, and I'm sure you've learned to be wary of men, but I swear that my intentions are entirely honorable." We

cherish the old stories for their changelessness. Arthur dreams eternally in Avalon. Bilbo can go "there and back again," and "there" is always the beloved familiar Shire. Don Quixote sets out forever to kill a windmill... So people turn to the realms of fantasy for stability, ancient truths, immutable simplicities..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..As though the blush were transmitted by a virus, Junior caught the primrose-pink contagion from the pianist..Robert Heinlein saved her. Over hot dogs and chips, she read to Barty from Red Planet, beginning at the top of page 104. He had previously shared enough of the story with Agnes so that she felt connected to the narrative, and soon she was sufficiently involved with the tale that she was better able to conceal her anguish..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.. "Well," Agnes said, "thank the Lord, we don't have tornadoes here in California." To the alleyway again. Not through the clothopper-cluttered gallery this time. Around the block at a brisk walk..The nurse was in was gone, but Maria remained in attendance. She the vinyl-and-stainless-steel armchair, busy at..On one particular street in Bright Beach, however, the most significant event of the year occurred on a pleasant afternoon in early April, when Barty, now nine years old, climbed to the top of the great oak and perched there in triumph, king of the tree and master of his blindness..Young boys, however, are not moved by scenery, especially not when their hearts are adventuring on Mars..Nearly two weeks ago, in the Spruce Hills hospital, Junior had been drawn by some strange magnetism to the viewing window at the neonatal-care unit. There, transfixed by the newborns, he sank into a slough of fear that threatened to undo him completely. By some sixth sense, he had realized that the mysterious Bartholomew had something to do with babies..replace her. I'd never be able to spend a penny of it. Not a penny. I'd have to give it away. What would be the point?..Something was due to happen in this peculiar, extended, almost casual haunting under which he had suffered for more than two years, since finding the quarter in his cheeseburger. While all around him in the streets, people bustled in good cheer, Junior slouched along in a sour mood, temporarily having forgotten to look for the bright side..Rolling onto her side, fumbling in the dark, Celestina White snared the phone on the third ring. Her hello was also a yawn..After checking her carotid artery and detecting no pulse, Junior returned to the sofa in the living room. He fluffed the little pillow and left it precisely as he had found it..She found the switch and clicked off the lamp again. "Good-night, young prince."..Leaning across the front seat, he lowered the passenger's window six inches. Then he lowered the driver's-side window an equal distance.. "Mr. Cain, if he bothers you, would you want me to have his choke chain yanked? ".At home, Agnes had no appetite, but she fixed Barty a cheese sandwich, spooned potato salad into a dish, added a bag of corn chips and a Coke, and served this late dinner on a tray, in his room, where he was already in bed and reading Tunnel in the Sky.. "But the breed is nervous, dear. With a nervous breed, you just never know, do you?..He no longer had any reason to follow an exercise regimen. For twenty-three years, he'd needed to maintain good health in order to meet his responsibilities, but all the responsibilities that mattered to him had been lifted from his shoulders..He had met her in a university adult-extension course titled "Increasing Self-Esteem Through Controlled Screaming." Participants were taught to identify harmful repressed emotions and dissipate them through the authentic vocal imitations of a variety of animals..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..While Jacob had shuffled, Agnes had taken little Barty from his bassinet into her arms. She was surprised and discomfited to discover that the baby was to have his fortune told first..Neighbors might not be home. And by the time he knocked, asked to use the phone, dialed ... Too great a waste of time..In the neatly ordered bedroom, he removed his shoes. Stretching out on the bed, he stared at the ceiling, feeling useless.

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