

Multicultural characters in tragic conflict during the 1950s.

Vanishing Starlight

By David Clarkson

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A glowing blue flower, possibly a lily, is the central focus of the image. The petals are large and curved, with a bright blue glow emanating from them. The background is a deep blue, speckled with numerous small, bright white stars, creating a starry night sky effect. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of blue, from deep indigo to bright cyan.

VANISHING STARLIGHT

DAVID CLARKSON

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All characters and events depicted in this novel are fictitious, except: (1) The portrayal of Elvis Presley's actual appearance in Paris, Texas, is based on documentation provided by *The Paris News*, to which the author extends heartfelt thanks; and by eye-witness accounts. (2) The depictions of Alexander White Neville are based on archival data and on the author's recollections. (3) Descriptions of the 1916 fire and of the 1893 lynching, two events that occurred in Paris, Texas, are taken from a cross section of sources; they are historically factual. (4) The football games, including all players named, were both witnessed and researched by the author. (5) The lunch counter scene that took place in Dallas, Texas, April 25, 1960, is derivative of a true incident. Any similarities to other happenings, and to other persons, living or dead, are purely coincidental.

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Prologue: Meteors

Retrospect. The night of falling stars. At four hours before dawn, the vast arc of heaven burst aflame. Time had leaped ahead. The known world was ending. Sinners were persuaded to change their ways, for Judgment Day had come.

Those burning spears and arrows radiated from the constellation Leo and rained down in relentless, nightmarish thousands: the final battle, Armageddon.

Yet our golden sun shone again. Mother Earth looked the same. The art of nature, whether real or illusory, random or designed, had revealed a mere glimpse of its infinite palette.

Scientists, philosophers, theologians asked: What is the truth?

The answer has always been knowable.

Read verse three, behold the word. Light, light, light. The energy travels through space in photons, producing color. People are part of the spectrum; every droplet in the rainbow acts as a prism.

I shall tell you of this, Dewain, when again we dance.

And you, Lafeat, among the snow-white cotton blossoms.

And you, Leticia, when in Little Mexico we have a cafecito.

And you, Sheila, when in our hometown we drink cherry Cokes.

And you, Roscoe, in a Galveston beach's tumbling green waves.

Long ago I placed a milk bottle in a window. Ultraviolet radiation turned it the lavender shade of butterfly peas. I asked my schoolmates what wonder they saw. Purple glass! they blindly called. My poem on the experiment, "Captured Sunlight," escaped their comprehension.

Lately I have thought that the aim of technology is not to advance our creativeness but to crush it. Euterpe, I fear, will be the forgotten Muse. Once I discovered a castoff mandolin: gold tuning pegs, pearl inlays, broken strings. I was the instrument.

In life's tangled fabric what thread is most vital? The gift of sight, Maudie might say, for it blesses her world with artistic magic. I exalt memory, the key to my imagination. A raindrop, water for the masses, is for others a riotous sphere of protozoa; only a few, such as I, fancy it as a wondrous gem. Yet in trying to identify the monster that would destroy me, my mind is a darkened door.

DAVID CLARKSON

Twice in the span of one year a knife was held to my throat—by two different men. Even so, the lingering images leave me clueless as to the blunt object. I remember falling long ago: the impact, the pain, the blood, the flowers covering my body. Later came crazy clues—my mind teasing me. We all have our demons, and it appears I must tackle mine alone. The greatest obstacle to my recovery is this awful fear (or denial?) of the truth.

As for my chances, I cling to the wisdom of Kahlil Gibran: “Faith is an oasis in the heart which can never be reached by the caravan of thinking.” If again I escape this nightmare I shall celebrate life afresh: the morning-glory’s star-marked blossoms; a nighthawk’s herky-jerky flight; a musician playing a nocturne in midnight’s blue solitudes; the monarch butterfly’s amazing journey.

Eleanor Roosevelt stated, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Inspiring words, but a hidden danger is stalking me—a fiendish, lurking entity.

I’ve come to accept the existence of an opposite force, namely the impulse to kill. Like the ant lion waiting in ambush at the bottom of its pit, humans possess a genetic blueprint directing them to destroy. Only through culture is this tendency defeated.

Even at this crossroads I envision the cold blades. Yet this latest attack, different from the others, translates as the greater menace. If only the water lilies could talk—should I really want to know.

But hey, I ramble. Only Nicole is a worse scatterbrain. So, back I go to the subject at hand...

That was on November 13, 1833, nearly 127 years ago.

Today astronomers know it was a meteor stream, cast asunder by the comet Tempel-Tuttle returning from its 33-year solar orbit.

Less than two centuries ago (here, while I await my frightening destiny, it is September, 1960), “shooting stars” were identified as electrical sparks, chemical reactions, even fireflies.

False impressions, we know now. Further, they were not stars.

PART ONE

The Enchanted Grove

Chapter 1: The Double Rainbow

Beauty there be, observed the weary man, his day's work done. *And good*. He leaned against the corncrib, sunset gilding his ebony brow, and watched the flaxen hair of the landlady's daughter stream like a mare's-tail cloud above the rows of tall, ripening cotton. Then in the haze outlining the compress a horse-drawn wagon turned the corner. *Trouble*. He moved over to the kennel and stroked the silky muzzles of his greyhound pups, tensing when the child squeezed beside him. On the nearby street the driver stopped his team and barked a surly reprimand. The child skipped to the wagon, her face a counterpoint to the evening star. Glancing back, she signaled her V for Victory. The weary man headed toward his shack, whistling a bluesy lament. *Beauty, and good*. Thinking about this latest encounter, he hung his head, hands twitching. *But this man bad*. At the two-story mansion in the distance the landlady waited fussily, arms crossed. The smoky dusk thickened, sweet-potato orange.

Wednesday, April 20, 1938 Images of floating bodies flashed before Roscoe Bowdre. As the triple funeral droned through the Texas heat the pictures in his throbbing head unreeled like scenes from a horror movie. Out of cigarettes, he eased a red Chuckle from its cellophane wrapper, hoping the jellied candy would calm his jangled nerves.

Seated with the bereaved family, he itched to get away. Charley Yandell, the patriarchal farmer mourning beside him, murmured, "I regret you're leaving, Roscoe. That land you're inheriting..."

"My burden's too heavy, Papa. I've got shadows to shake."

Charley kneaded the spasms in his arthritic knuckles. "Where are you headed?"

The younger man, suddenly a widower, worked his chiseled jaw. "While you're gettin' the deed settled, I'll be in Dallas. Watch for a postcard. Then I might try Lamar County again." He straightened the cockerel hackle pluming his hatband, stroked his mustache, and scowled at the sharecropper who bowed his head as the choir sang "In the Sweet By and By." Then he crammed the green Chuckle into his mouth and stared intently at the floating montage, now vivid as

photographic slides.

Sunset weaves a golden shroud across the cypress swamp, where the rotting carcass of an alligator gar, its eyes plucked by a great blue heron, spreads the smell of death in the humid air. A robber fly patrols the receding water like a small-scale fighter plane, while in the diffused light a flock of wood storks flaps up, unfeathered necks extended. Stinkpot turtles splash in a grotto of interlaced branches, and a dragon's-mouth orchid wilts on a sphagnum floating island. Under dripping Spanish moss a fugitive shadow, tenuous as a ghost, falls over three drifting corpses.

“Then so be it,” Charley said as the baby’s casket was lowered. “I wish you godspeed.”

Roscoe, twenty-five, slapped a gnat off his knee, the tendons of his stumpy neck tautening as he chewed the gummy orange slice. “Much obliged for the blessin’,” he said, his focus attached to Shoat Spraggs, a sneering roughneck whose jug-eared face resembled the surviving boy’s. “But now I’m ramblin’ bound.”

Twilight spreads a gossamer pall over the dismal landscape. The lens of memory penetrates brutally, zooming into lustrous close-ups. The woman is snagged on sunken bedsprings, chalky arms outflung, belly clotted with leeches.

Charley turned ruefully, consoling his moaning wife, Zelma Bea. Roscoe nodded off but was awakened by his own snoring. He saw a dragonfly—twelve-spot skimmer—hovering before him. Each time he waved the insect away it persistently returned. Excepting a belief in random luck, both good and bad, he held no superstitions, though Marvadean had fretted over a two-headed rat snake on the morning preceding the tragedy. “Ignorant hick,” he grumbled, scowling at the long-winded pastor.

Moonrise sifts a silvery veil over thickets of devil’s-walkingstick. Cricket frogs strike up a chorus, piping sounds of clicking pebbles. The scream of a vixen echoes through the macabre solitude.

The descending dihedral of a turkey vulture marred the cloudless sky. Gravediggers leaned on spades before a honey locust. When the service ended, Roscoe gave Zelma Bea a cursory embrace, pumped Charley’s hand, and tramped from the cemetery, calling “So long” to

VANISHING STARLIGHT

the humble gathering, the yellow Chuckle tossing on his tongue. "I'll be back for that fair-haired whelp when I'm situated." *Though he ain't my blood kin*, he thought bitterly. He hefted his Fabrikoid suitcase from the rumble seat of Charley's 1929 Pierce-Arrow sedan and vanished into the greenwood, a rain crow's guttural *k-kuk, k-kuk* echoing his ponderous strides. Thirsty from the candy, he knelt at a bubbling spring, gazed admiringly at his reflection, and drank while recalling his first rapture there with Marvadean. With time to kill, he sat beneath a dogwood, watched snowy bracts flutter to the ground, and fell asleep. Minutes later, soaked with sweat, he faced a doglike animal—perhaps one of the rabid foxes reported in the area. Shaken, he searched for spoor, realizing he had merely dreamed. Continuing through the woods, his destination Winnsboro, he blotted his buried wife from his thoughts, remembering Fernia Jernigan, a sweetheart from his school days. *I've heard she's still single. She'll be loaded when her old lady dies off.*

He half expected, and fervently desired, trouble along the way, but Shoa't's folks were sleeping off an all-night coon hunt. "Baby killer," Shoa't had taunted. "Whose baby?" Roscoe had snapped back. Now, passing a section of hardwood bottomland, he saw a roadrunner flutter up and alight just beyond striking distance of a timber rattler in its melanoid phase. The feathered assassin fanned its white-edged wings and raised its rudderlike tail, neck stretched, yellow eyes riveted to the coiled reptile. Roscoe, peering over red funnels of southern buckeye, noticed that the snake was missing its rattles, lopped off by a farmer's hoe. Moving sluggishly, its eyesight weak, the rattler flicked its modified, forked tongue and, collecting scent, jabbed at its wily foe, which jumped back on X-shaped feet to elude the deadly fangs. Then the bird, crest flaring jauntily, grated its beak in a strange chuckle and dealt a brain-piercing stab. Roscoe whooped with self-identity.

Katydid's vibrate their mechanical cacophony. A moth circles the beam of the deputy's flashlight. In the forbidding, depthless gloom a will-o'-the-wisp recedes, lantern eyes flickering.

He checked his bearings by the sun and set a northward course, preferring streams and woodlands to a hot, dusty road. Bull-necked

and drum-chested, standing a half inch under six feet, he had arms that bulged like hornbeam limbs, stovelid-sized hands, and glossy hair of crow's-wing black matting his ruddy complexion. Reaching the icehouse at Smyrna, he drank more water. Then he crossed State Highway 11, followed a creek-lined pasture, and veered west on the Louisiana and Arkansas Railroad, his grinding footsteps embodying his steamroller demeanor. *But Fernia's a gamble*, he reckoned. *That slicker with the toyshop's been sparkin' her.*



In Winnsboro he bided time about the bus station, one foot propped against a wall adjoining the State Theater, whose marquee promoted *Carefree*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Two adolescent girls strolled by, one leafing *Crackajack Funnies*, the other giggling over *Tip Top Comics*. Roscoe ogled them, snorting as they blushed. A Buick Series 80 Roadmaster occupied by four men motored onto Sage Street, the driver a sawmill operator named Pruett Jessup.

Roscoe moseyed to East Elm Street and ducked into a blind alley to avoid the westering sun. Behind a greasy spoon three tortoiseshell kittens lapped milk from a carnival-glass saucer. Pigeons flapped up from a rooftop water tower as the Buick swerved into the alley, mud caking its white sidewalls. Pruett, a bruiser emboldened by a slug of Carstairs, swung onto the pavement, motioned his cohorts to follow, and angrily faced Roscoe, who waited with irreverent sang-froid.

“You galoots lookin’ for me?” Roscoe drawled.

“That’s him,” Pruett accused, his face red as mayhaw jelly. “The backstabber who deep-sixed Marvadean and her kids.”

Roscoe stood his ground. “Charley send you rubes here?”

“He’s too proud for that,” Pruett said, prodding a stringbean who gripped a Cattaraugus jackknife. “Lay his guts open, Troy!”

Roscoe braced himself, grinning with foursquare insolence. “I’ll notch your catcher’s-mitt ears with that shank.”

Troy’s clumsy lunge missed badly. Roscoe, nimble as a matador, gripped the man’s wrist and, planting a shin against his wobbly legs, flipped and slammed him on his back. Snatching the loosened knife, he jammed the blade into a crack and snapped it with a twang. Troy, breathless, his arm wrenched, writhed like a lizard on a griddle.

VANISHING STARLIGHT

Pruett drained his liquor and nodded to the others, who reminded Roscoe of Andy Gump and Moon Mullins. They retreated beside the car, minnow-eyed. Pruett flung a haymaker that Roscoe ducked with reckless panache, his rooster feather unruffled. With a wicked punch to the solar plexus, he dropped Pruett like an empty cottonsack.

“Who’s next?” he dared the duo cringing behind the Roadmaster.



Striding from the alley, he saw the bus arriving from Mount Vernon, its compressed air belching when the driver released the brake. He bought a ticket, shoved his suitcase into an overhead compartment, slumped in a seat, ripped the red strip off a Cavalier cigarettes pack, and opened his Pig Stand matchbook, a smug expression wreathing his mustachioed mouth.

The stepdaughter is stuck in a half-sunken pine, sandy hair flung over fissured bark, face fern-entwined. Her spindly legs, caught in a whirlpool, spin in perpetual motion.

Roscoe winked at a peeping, bluebonnet-eyed sprite who favored Fernia as a schoolgirl. Lighting up, he faced a window, watching the mirrored girl unwrap her Snirkles caramel bar, whose swirled layers evoked the eddying water. Then he leaned back and, puffing smoke, hummed the lulling “Little Rosewood Casket.” *I’m movin’ up in this hit-or-miss world. Tonight I’ll drink to the wheel of fortune.*

A lantern suffuses the spatterdock pads with a phosphoric glow. Beside the woman a fleshy cord is connected to a bobbing form. The newborn baby, a cherubic girl, bears his own likeness.

He crushed his cigarette in an ashtray. *Accident*, he told himself. *The law says so.* Blanking the drownings from his conscience, hat shading his bloodshot eyes, he jammed the black Chuckle between his molars and grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Monday, August 26, 1946 Anglo-Americans call the Dallas enclave Little Mexico. To six-year-old Leticia Ricarte it is simply *el barrio*. Lying just north of downtown, it stretches east from the Katy Line to McKinney Avenue. It was first settled three decades earlier when the Mexican Revolution started northbound migrations. The Ricarte family, from the Lower Rio Grande Valley, resides on Alamo Street

near the Neuhoff Brothers packing plant, whose strong smells they have adjusted to during their two years of struggling in its shadow.

Rapid eye movement. Bands of light stream into Leticia's sleep, enclosing her in a sunny bubble. The visitor is her grandmother, her beloved *abuelita*.

"Tell me, *hija*, about your *familia*."

"*Claro que sí. Mi padre*, your *guapo* son Delfino, has those eyes *lucientes*, the *fuerte* chin. He is a dishwasher—or the pearl diver, as he jokes—at the Taxco Café. Every spring he makes extra money in the onion fields near Princeton, and in late summer he picks cotton south of Paris. He studies to be a mechanic but finds no work in that trade. He speaks English *en el hogar*, believing Enrique and I shall benefit. Sometimes he slips into Spanish, mixing two languages.

"*Mi madre*, Adelina, who is *simpática* as a *paloma*, changes beds and scrubs toilets at the Town House Tourist Court on Harry Hines Boulevard. It is near Pike Park's swimming pool and dance floor. She understands English but has trouble speaking it.

"*Mi hermano*, Enrique, is eleven. He is *perezoso* (lazy) but helps me fix our *desayuno* each morning. We make *tortas compuestas* and *champurrado*—Mexican chocolate. Another day, it is *picatostes*—deep-fried bread cut into bite-size squares, sprinkled with powdered sugar. On hot afternoons, if we have *piña*, *canela*, and *hielo*, I make *tepache*—without *cerveza* or *tequila*, of course."

(A distant streetcar clangs, and a tamale vendor trundles his cart up the unpaved, winding street. But Leticia does not hear, for in her state her brain waves are altered; her body is paralyzed due to motor neurons in her relaxed spinal cord receiving shut-down signals from her pons Varolii.)

"You must know, *hija*, that your *padre* is an American hero. He served with the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment during the war. His feet got frostbite on a snowy battlefield in France. Now tell me, *chamaca*, how is your new home?"

"I find it different but wonderful. All the people are *mexicanos*. No one calls me 'wetback,' as some did in Brownsville. Our home, it will please you to see, is centered around María Guadalupana. Our courtyard in back is *maravillosa*, filled with bougainvillea and other

VANISHING STARLIGHT

fine *flores*. The pomegranate tree has red-orange blossoms, with fat *granadas* of sunrise colors. Paco, our pet *perro*, guards us through the night from *lechuzas*—witches disguised as *tecolotes* (owls). Our *casa es pequeña*, the style Anglos call *shotgun*.”

(A *gallo* crows. She is oblivious, her senses controlled by stimuli bombarding her thalamus and cerebral cortex.)

“Follow me now, *abuelita*, southeast from the packing company to our *cafés* and *taquerías*: Alamo Stand, Dos Papagayos, La Fonda Rosa. *Ahorita* you see the Four Deuces Bar, where men drink, talk, and sing *canciones*. (Papá tells me to avoid the *cantinas*, for there is fighting, even fatal knifings.) Next we pass the Hernández Grocery where we buy our *abarrotos*, all we require for a kettle of *menudo*. I am not allowed to cross McKinney Avenue because of heavy traffic. Once I sneaked to Casa Tula, a shop for gifts and curios. My parents were troubled that I had disobeyed them.

“The next street is Caroline. There are *muchas familias* here, all *pobre* but hard-working and proud. Jiménez Grocery & Market and Mongaras Grocery are two other fine *tiendas* for food. The Salinas Barber Shop is next door. It is where men gather for all the *barrio* news. There is a tavern, El Ranchito, across the street. Turning north again we come to Payne Street, where the Azteca Barber Shop and La Paloma Café stand a block apart. Cutting back toward McKinney Avenue we find North Harwood Street. Here are El Amigo (another *barbería*) plus two more *mercados*—the Cervantes, and the Zúñiga. Farther east I show you *mis favoritas* of all places, next door to each other—St. Ann’s Parochial School, where I will start first grade in a month, and the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Another place is La Estrella Panadería, the bakery on North Akard and Moody where we get *conchas* (seashells), anise-flavored *marranitos* (gingerbread pigs), *cuernitos* (little horns), and for Christmas *buñuelos* (pastries topped with powdered sugar). Since we are a musical *familia* hoping to start a band *mi padre* buys Spanish-language *discos* at the Avalos Record Shop on Harry Hines, north of Charlie Villasana’s grocery.

“I feel *cariña* for my home and family. Last year we celebrated Christmas with *un árbol de Navidad*. I hung the peppermint candy canes—*bastones dulces*—on the boughs.

“I miss my birthplace, Brownsville, with its festive Charro Days! Always you shouted ‘¡Caramba!’ as hundreds of people crossed the International Bridge showing their *pasaportes*. Remember watching me dance *el sapo* (the toad)? I was four when we moved to Dallas.”

Leticia awakens, eyes smarting from the sunlight. She rubs away teardrops, for her *abuelita* had died shortly after the war’s end when the family left Brownsville.

That evening her father arrived home early, defiance in his fiery eyes. “Today I quit,” he announced to Adelina. “So *mañana* we go to Paris again, to pick the cotton.”

“But Papá,” the girl protested. “What about school?”

“*Cálmate ahora, muchacha*. Don’t be a *mocosa*. *No hay rosa sin una espina*. There is no rose without a thorn.”

At that time Paris, in northeast Texas, was a railroad center located at the junction of two major lines: the Texas & Pacific, extending to points east and west; and the Santa Fe and the Frisco (St. Louis and San Francisco), providing service to the north and south.

Sunday, November 23, 1947 Huddled on a flatcar battling the cold wind, Gideon Quirke yodeled a Jimmie Rodgers tune as the freight train slowed southwest of Paris. Wary of railroad police waiting to thrash his lanky frame, he hopped to the roadbed and headed for the grain elevators, watching storm clouds darken. “Gonna see my wife and daughter,” he shouted, nodding at a meadowlark.

At sunrise, in the lucid vault of her dream, the foxed print of her father flickers into being, his gentle hands pushing her on the swing. Believe, she thought, shivering awake on her pallet.

Passing a persimmon grove, he noticed a lifeless yellow-bellied sapsucker, its neck drilled by a hollow-point .22 shell. *Some squirrel hunter’s target practice*, he guessed, sniffing the resin-coated beak. He raked a shroud of leaves over the bird and uncovered a tarnished penny. *I’m keepin’ this token for luck.*

She watches shadowy movements. The man’s greasy hands open the Monarch cookstove’s soundless grate. In the enveloping pall the woman’s knuckles blur over a zinc washboard. Beyond the window,

VANISHING STARLIGHT

pigeon-colored clouds thicken.

His plan would bring redemption for years lost in the Army. He would take Hettie and the girl back to Dallas and continue his job hauling cement. His funds in the postwar 52-20 Club were gone, but new hope glimmered on the horizon.

Her fingers wiggle the stubby pencil, forming pothooks along the newspaper's yellowed edges. The man, Willie Prickett, releases his ramrod, stands the rifle on its stock, inserts a reflecting dime in the breech, and squints down the barrel to check the bore. The woman, Willie's mother Idalee, quarters a rabbit for parboiling in a covered pot, her butcher knife flashing in the grainy light.

The strong wind stirred like an alembic, distilling the heady odor of horsemint. Gideon snugged his field jacket and trudged to Neagle Avenue. He had wired Hettie a C-note via Western Union last week, but a double-edged question bothered him—was Hettie still in Paris, and would the girl know him?

Steam puffs from a gooseneck teakettle, fogging a broken pane. Idalee pokes a straw in cornbread, scattering a sweet, musty aroma. Willie leans his rimfire .22 rifle against the woodbox, lights a Wings cigarette, and stands a domino upright, its pips evoking hailstones. Guinea hens scratch the dooryard's goathead weeds—shadows in a visual sphere, forever hushed.

A flash of memory, the cidery tang of windfall apples abuzz with reeling wasps, comforted Gideon as he headed down Frisco Avenue, where flocks of house sparrows pecked at peppergrass seedpods. He found the tarpaper-sided house boarded up, the apple tree blackened by fire blight. A half block farther along he spotted a blowsy woman hammering a picket on a fence. A red babushka was knotted beneath her puffy jowls, her Army jacket's elbows were canvas-patched, and lisle stockings encased her heavy, spider-veined calves.

"Say, ma'am," he called, "did Mrs. Quirke move?"

"Yonder way," she rasped, pointing north over clotheslines that snapped billowing bedsheets. "She hooked up with a new man last summer. Deadbeat husband quit sending money."

Gideon stiffened. "Another man?"

"Freeloading sot. I'd declare it. Pity how her little girl's treated."

He contained his anger and turned north toward Market Square. *That old gal's wrong. Hettie don't take to spongers, and Maudie got good care when she caught scarlet fever.* He cracked a pecan missed by the squirrels and popped the broken kernels in his mouth.

For the Pricketts the wishbook has only one purpose, but the girl has found another. She lays a paper doll on an order form, traces its outline with the pencil, and renders a flawless sketch of a costume, including tunic, peplum, and ostrich boa. Then without checking her work Willie rips out the form and several other sheets and clumps to a toilet whose hanging door is a mildewed quilt.

He paused before a stately home as a girl of six dashed through a wrought-iron gate to the sidewalk—*leap one-legged, 1-2-3; left foot 4, right foot 5; spring to 6 cricket-quick; both feet down on 7-8; hop to 9 and pirouette; repeat in reverse and pick up marker; green eyes flashing, plaid skirt flaring.* Spying him, she called cheerily, “Hello. My name’s Tanjie.” Her straight, waist-length hair conjured for him the yellow hue of goldenseal roots.

“As like to my daughter as a cowslip to a harebell,” he twanged.

She eyed him quizzically. “Maybe I know her.”

He started to respond, but an ashen-faced woman, from whom he had once bummed a cheese sandwich, flurried onto the veranda and signaled the child indoors.

“Your daughter’s lucky,” Tanjie fancied. “I don’t have a daddy.” She huffed away pouting, Mary Janes clacking on concrete.

Walking a block north, he noticed a red truck parking before the mansion. A man built like a Hereford bull, his hatband a corona of fishing flies, stepped from the cab; and the vibrant girl, whose name Gideon had already forgotten, leaped to his arms, the woman aiming a scolding finger at her. *She'll get a daddy,* he predicted. *And that'll be a good thing.*

The city’s contrasts had always baffled him. For each postbellum edifice that the fire of 1916 had spared, there prevailed elsewhere an abject eyesore. Glancing down an alley between Brown and Parr, he saw a graveyard of scrapped automobiles—a bootlegger’s front. On West Washington Street he admired a stunning Victorian residence, one of many scattered throughout Paris. At Sherman Street a sea of

VANISHING STARLIGHT

junk—bathtubs, iceboxes, washing machines, wringers—sprawled over lawns and curbs. Behind him a slattern leaned out a shack door calling, “You lookin’ for jellyroll? I gots de bes’.”

No coins tumble from her Ohio Art globe bank. Overnight in her muted cosmos a fairy ring has sprouted, sprinkling a crescent of cream-capped mushrooms amid rubied oak leaves, sudden as the kittens scouting their universe beyond the sagging woodshed.

Gideon, famished, would have to look for his wife and daughter later. *Where could I get some grub for the fifteen cents I’ve got left? Market Square used to have a diner...*

He stopped on a sidewalk that had been poured since he last saw the town. Chalked across the first square was: *Lucky G—Go Look For Me ↑. Seventh letter of the alphabet*, Gideon mused. *Ain’t done nothin’ for me yet.* At the sidewalk’s end the cryptic message was repeated: *Lucky G—Go Look For Me ↑.*

Willie pounds a towsack against the chinaberry trunk. Then he shuffles to the alley, the lumpy burlap oozing red. Cedar waxwings festoon the tree, eating mushy yellow fruitballs. She sneaks across the backyard. In the woodshed the month-old kittens are missing.

He saw that the diner had changed owners and been remodeled, the scrolled sign reading: *Kandy Kitchen—W. Maloof, Prop.* Gideon squinted through the plate-glass window at jellybeans, candy corn, gumdrops, nonpareils, kisses. *No rib-stickin’ eats in this joint.* He grew conscious of his shaggy beard, threadbare brogans, and stained fedora that he tugged when a gust backed him against a lamppost. A scrawny, towheaded boy hopped off a Hoopie—a Model A with its tonneau converted to a cargo compartment—and fired his slingshot at a Koken leaded-glass barber pole.

The engine of a 1930 Franklin, hoisted off its mounts by block and tackle, bends a hickory bough. Sunlight streams through bare branches, striping Willie’s rachitic back. Idalee chops up bois-d’arc apples to keep out the cockroaches. I won’t be missed. Where’s that chalk Tanjie gave me?

Gideon remembered a smart aleck whose cocky grin provoked a fight. As a rule he avoided violence, for his blood had barely clotted fast enough to pass the Army’s physical testing. *When I slugged that*

rascal his head struck a railroad switchin' frog. He recovered, but I learned that gettin' riled depends on what a man chooses to think. Rage happens when a problem is made of somethin' trivial. People get ornery by blowin' up picayune events. Every man's got a double nature. I lost my head and crossed the line. Now he spotted a police car, two-toned—called a Holstein in Oklahoma—and looked away.

A skein of Canada geese stipples the clouds like poppyseeds. The image reflects double in her looking-glass eyes. She perceives by the jerking of his lower lip that Willie is singing "Wabash Cannonball." A roving photographer leads a Shetland pony down the alley. Sweet magic, to take a cowgirl picture—like Dale Evans riding Buttermilk. But Willie, pivoting like a weathercock, shakes no.

Gideon stood indecisively. *Life's all about chance*, he reminded himself, recalling the story of Bobby Leach, who survived a plunge in a barrel over Niagara Falls; the man later died after slipping on an orange peel. He also thought of Isadora Duncan, tragically strangled when her long, versicolor scarf tangled in the rear axle of a Bugatti sports car. *Like a blue streak. Lord willin', I'll pull my family outa this destitution.* Glancing up, he spotted a Buck Rogers Strato-Kite snagged on a power line. A gnawing doubt seeped into his bones.

The squirrel cage revolves, its fat occupant a nine-pound possum that, with sweet potatoes, will be baked for Christmas. Wind shakes the milkweed's plumed seedpods. The white hood of a junked 1932 Marmon, starred with sweetgum leaves, points toward a caterpillar shape of black smoke slanting over the railroad. Oh, believe...



He saw a child who, sandy-haired and forlorn, had climbed upon the limestone stringcourse by the Kandy Kitchen's entrance, her grubby earmuffs, frayed jacket, and patched britches bringing sorrow to his heart. *Could be Maudie's schoolmate.* The thought scattered like the rain now pelting the sidewalk. He ducked under a green awning and, hands pocketed, caressed the wooden doll he had carved for Maudie while riding the rails. Nestled beneath it was his treasured jackknife, a cocobola-handled lockback whittler with matching, hard-tempered blades of crocus-polished carbon steel that, flawlessly tapered with a double-swedged grind, he kept clean and religiously oiled, the edges

honed razor-sharp with a medium-grit Arkansas stone.

Indoors a hefty man, stony eyes intensified by a creased glabella, florid cheeks crowding a recessive chin, hovered behind a Hallwood cash register. His overtight shirt sported red sleeve garters; a tawdry boater with a bowknot band topped his hairless head. “What’ll it be, Buster?” he barked, his contempt barely masked.

“Hold your horses,” Gideon said. He noticed the girl pressing her nose against the window, dreamily eyeing Turkish delights, coconut bonbons, pecan divinity, bridge mix, and motto hearts, her upper lip arched like a crossbow.

“That gal can gawk till sundown,” Maloof grunted. “If I give any handouts, every snot-nosed scamp on the street’ll show up. Long as she keeps her place, I’ll tol’rate her.”

Skinflint, Gideon determined, skimming the chocolate haystacks, peppermint pillows, marshmallow peanuts, and root-beer barrels. At the counter’s end he whiffed a batch of cascading popcorn. The sign read: *Large Bag—10 cents*. He called elatedly for this thrifty option, deciding, *That’ll beat a goose goblin’*.

Maloof squeezed his potbellied bulk behind the popper and, with pompous, wheezing aplomb, filled a circus-striped bag, withholding it until Gideon, detecting a scent of Sloan’s Liniment, paid the dime.

Taking a chair, Gideon munched the salty comestible, aware that the girl inched closer, her peeping eyes pennyroyal-blue. He entered an imaginary sanctum, drawing a shutter over his guilt, and pictured the peerless diamond that was Maudie. *Can’t wait to see her*.

Gideon finished half the bag and stuffed the balance in a pocket, alongside the carved doll. A display of lemon drops beckoned below an oval Grapette clock. He got the penny pincher to weigh a nickel’s worth by paying in advance. The gems clinked in a golden plenty on the Dayton scale. When Maloof forked over the lumpy sack, Gideon savored the tart goodness of the sugary morsels. Outdoors, a chubby boy teased the girl by shoveling a chunk of Holloway’s Trade Wind, a peanut-based candy bar, into his slavering mouth.

Stepping into the biting wind, rubbing his lucky penny, Gideon noticed to his east parallel arcs of pastel colors, the secondary bow a finger-painting smudge to the primary’s left. *Ain’t that some sight?*

I'd wager it means good fortune. Looking down he saw earthworms floating in the gutter's rainwater. *The whole show hinges on chance. Cream for some, blue-john for others.*

A tug at his coattail made him reach for the knife. Seeing the girl step back he relaxed, and then saw in the phenomenon of the double rainbow and in the tenacious child's innocence a duality: impersonal nature, and human suffering.

Maloof poked his head below the awning with a dismissive grunt and squinted at the twin rainbows, the fumes of Sloan's Liniment on his taurine neck evoking the sapsucker's turpentine scent.

Gideon peered down at a mirroring puddle, studying his stubborn face, the jejune cast of his gray eyes. "All right," he sighed, offering the candy. The girl slipped a nugget on her tongue and stepped back clutching the sack, her hair crackling with electric cold. "Hey, not so fast," he said. "I didn't mean..."

She pointed a finger toward the shop in an odd, looping gesture.

"I'd ignore that little cadger," Maloof advised. "She's a *dummy*, speechless as a Patsy doll. Got sick last Christmas, gummed up her middle ears. Ain't worth strippin' your voice box over."

Maloof's callous comments burned a frictional spark in Gideon's conscience. The child's baffling signals showed a growing distress. Maloof shook out a handkerchief, blew his nose with a bugle honk, and ducked inside the store.

Suddenly a scowling man, new to Gideon but familiar to the girl, chopped her arm like a hatchet, knocking the sack to the sidewalk. The lemon drops scattered, fanning toward a parking meter like the eyes of a peacock's tail.

"You couldn't hear an *atom bum*," the man hollered, twisting her sleeve. A carbuncle below his red hunting cap tipped an earlobe like a possumhaw berry. Gideon, hackles raised, fists clenched, spun to confront him, but was blocked by Maloof, who was sweeping candy toward the curb.

"Always somethin' litterin' up my storefront," Maloof grumbled. "Tobacco spit, whittlin's, and *this* junk strewn all over creation." A howling gust blew off his boater. He slammed down the broom and lumbered after the hat, which bounced on its brim like a wheel.

VANISHING STARLIGHT

Gideon tensed steel-tight, his blind spot, the latent heat of anger, infiltrating his nerves. He swung the broom against a parking meter, splintering the handle just as a patrol car screeched to the curb. Two uniformed policemen, Kruschke and Nordhoff, leaped out, the latter shoving Gideon over a fender. Lifting the knife he observed, “Fancy pig-sticker. You’re caught red-handed, heisting that meter.”

“But, officer...”

“Save it for the judge, hoodlum,” Kruschke snapped. “Plant your duff on yonder ledge while I draw a bead on this situation.”

Gideon plopped obediently on the building’s projecting base, the carved doll perched beside him.

Maloof was closing the gap on his boater when a vagrant Gideon recognized as DeKalb Chick pinned it against a manhole cover. The shopkeeper grabbed the item as if Chick’s hand had contaminated it. Chick chortled, his mouth emitting the smell of canned heat. Maloof slapped the hat on his polished dome and bustled gasping toward his property. Noticing the ruckus, he swelled with relief. “Awful nice of you gents, puttin’ the pinch on the riffraff.”

The child whirled loose and scooped up a lemon drop, skinning a knuckle. Her earmuffs hung crookedly, the wind whipping twines of hair about her pink, translucent ears.

“Blast you, Maudie,” the choleric stranger hollered. “Yore hide’s gittin’ a tannin’.”

Gideon waited in silence, confusion tempering his anger. The red truck he had seen at the mansion rumbled up the street, windows closed against the wind, and the little girl he recalled as a hopscotch whiz waved perkily. Looking down, he saw chalkmarks at his feet and swallowed hard, reading the message:

I AM MAUDIE Q.
R. U. LUCKY G?

As the frantic girl stamped her foot on the scrawled code, he felt a numbing remorse. How wrong, how unfair this rude destiny—over a simple mix-up! He looked at the rainbow as if seeking providence. Blackbirds blotted the bare trees like ink splattered in slow motion. Gideon’s outlook evanesced to ragged edges.

Now handcuffed, he was pushed into the patrol car's back seat. "Might be another loony sprung loose from Terrell," said Nordhoff. "Worked up over that chicken scratch on the sidewalk."

Peering out the rear window Gideon saw the red-capped stranger dragging Maudie away. He felt a leaden guilt for his long, extended absence. *No mistakin' her blood*, he thought. *She's a fighter.*

He watched DeKalb Chick, who, weaving toward the scene now, was too zonked to recognize him. Years ago Chick had offered him life-saving advice—a mixed blessing, for his warning had resulted in recurring nightmares. *Midnight, and a manifest freight's haulin' out of Springfield, Missouri. I'm runnin' beside a boxcar, tryin' to keep pace until I can grab the rear ladder. My fingers grip an iron rung at the height of my eyeballs, but I'm thrown off and rollin' down the gravel. "You a fool tryin' dat, Gid," yells Chick. "Always go for the front laddah—you gwine be slammed aroun' anyway. On the car's front end yo' back gwine smack against the side, jolt you like a lightnin' strike, but you be alive. At the other you get whipped aroun' and pitched right under them thunderin' wheels."*

In ensuing dreams Gideon had found himself swinging between coupled boxcars like a monkey on a jungle-gym bar, heels dragging below, the deadly wheels grinding horribly. Fortunately he suffered no memory of being blown from an M4 Sherman tank while serving with the US Army in North Africa.

The patrol car nosed into a U-turn, the tires squealing in his mind like the train's journal bearings, and sped for the county courthouse five blocks north. A racking moan escaped Gideon's larynx.

Maloof, wielding the broomstick, propelled the carved doll into the gutter. He glowered at DeKalb Chick, who noted, "Mean worl' for dat po' chile. Her mama died fo' months ago."

Wild geese passed over in a strung-out chevron, their cries a joy to all but the deaf and the mindless indifferent. The eastern sky with its double rainbow had changed to a drawn gray curtain.

Chapter 2: The Green Ribbon

Sunday, March 21, 1948 Sulking over her mother's latest scolding, Tanjie Lajoie sneaked to the wisteria arbor, aware that her seventh birthday was turning upside-down. The ledge she straddled, topped by a warped plank, divided the square fishpond. South, beyond the screen of yaupon holly, schoolmates still rode Diablo. Nearer, the birdbath was overturned, the flowerpots broken. She loosened the ribbon that matched her apple-green eyes, spilling her golden hair in fairy-spun ravelings. Then the slam of a truck door on the house's north side spiraled her into fear. She tiptoed around the dovecote and peeped at the familiar red vehicle. Through the virgin's-bower arbor to her east someone was aiming a gun at a man on the street. Her heart breaking, she circled back south, shrieking, "Lafeat, watch out!" But forgetting the toppled birdbath, she tripped over the fluted pedestal and dived toward the fishpond just as a bullet caromed off the wrought-iron fence; and in the instant before her head struck the plank-topped ledge she saw four blurry figures—the bashful boy on the water tower; a drunkard weaving below the sycamore; a woman fidgeting by the toolshed; and a man in overalls, back turned, hands shaking. Beneath the commands of a gruff voice she fussed over her rainbow-striped sundress, spattered horribly red. Her last impression en route to the hospital was of a windblown spray of plum blossoms clinging to her blanket-wrapped body.



A three-quarter moon beamed through wispy clouds when Detective Wade Delahunt parked his Frazer Manhattan before Maison Lajoie for the second time that evening. *I've missed something*, he thought, hearing a mockingbird test its serenade.

Sunset was a coppery haze when he inspected the scene earlier. "Accident," Mrs. Vandegraff, the washerwoman—Clothesline Lady to the neighborhood's children—had croaked behind the alley gate. "Mrs. Lajoie insisted on it."

"Chances are," he told the blustery woman, "the lady's right."

"Spoiled daredevil didn't get what she pined for. Traipsed down

that slippery ledge out of spite. I'd declare it."

"I'll put that opinion in the hopper, ma'am." Delahunt, fifty-two, had tipped his pearl-gray fedora and left her spouting. *That windbag oughta clam up. We don't need rumors.*

Returning to the present, he mentally replayed his scan through the antique-filled mansion. The rooms were tidy, but a bloodstained bedspread had caught his eye.

"I beg your pardon," Fernia Lajoie had snapped, fumbling a box of Tampax into a bureau drawer.

Checking his pocket watch, a railroad *turnip*, he had changed the subject. "Enough bric-a-brac here to stock a gift shop." On a table inlaid with ivory buhlwork, a moss-agate letter opener glinted atop a *Modern Screen* picturing Alan Ladd on the cover. The instrument's reddish-brown markings had evoked the suspicious blood.

Tanjie's doctor, his mind still playing the eighteenth green, had been evasive. "Concussion, Wade. Certain injuries are inconsistent with a fall, but at least she wasn't violated."



Her day had begun with a medley of mischief—teasing her cat with a clew of yarn, making Elmore mad as a yellow jacket, sneaking her Puss 'n Boots archery set from the gifts hidden in the cupola, and tricking that bashful boy with the Sunset Carson smile. She had a spirited outlook, her dreams bright and golden.

Before breakfast she had rocketed outdoors in appliquéd-panda pajamas to refill her water pistol, a Daisy Squirt-O-Matic. Elmore, visiting with his father, chased her in his briefs, cursing when he splashed in the fishpond. "I'll kill you this time, Tanj!"

"You Tarzan, me Jane," the girl countered.

Elmore geysered up from the water, but was blocked by Roscoe Bowdre, his iceman father who warned, "Harm one hair on her, and you'll pay with three licks."

"I wasn't gonna hurt the little heifer," Elmore yelped.

Tanjie muffled a snicker. "He's mad 'cause I squirted him."

Roscoe, dusting his Resistol hat and lighting a Cavalier cigarette, whooped, "Great day for catfish!" Abruptly he spun toward the boy, scowling. "Get your britches on, you rabbit-brained ignoramus. And

keep your mitts off my honey bunch.”

The man tossed his tackle box on his truckbed and crouched by a bed of shaggy-mane mushrooms whose pink gills dripped ink-black. He cocked his head, identifying a cigarette butt, and spat scornfully. *That damn cropper’s been prowlin’ here again.*

Elmore, watching him drive off, cornered Tanjie in the kitchen.

“Help me, Mom,” she shrieked. “Elmore’s gonna *kill* me.”

Fernia noticed the boy’s soaked underwear and shook a spatula at Tanjie. “Keep *away* from that vulgar wretch,” she hissed.

The boy’s neck bristled red, his eyebrows arching as Snowball, Tanjie’s pet duck, squabbled near the birdbath. “I’ll get even, you snitch.” He ran upstairs, buckled on his Headlight overalls, pinned a Johnny Weissmuller badge to the bib, snatched Tanjie’s Kix Atomic Bomb Ring, drummed his scraggy chest, hollered the call of his idol Tarzan, and trotted home for his slingshot.



If she’d only be watchful. Fernia Lajoie peered above her sedated daughter, her view out the hospital window blurring where sunset’s blinding rays gilded a church dome. This city—Paris, seat of Lamar County—was believed safe for children. *But I can’t control her.*

Roscoe Bowdre, the barrel-chested iceman, stood twirling his hat in the doorway. “I called the sheriff, Fernia. Be a slew of gumshoes up here d’rectly.”

“If someone hurt my daughter *before* she fell,” snapped Fernia, a blue-eyed widow with platinum hair, “let them arrest that disgusting Willie Prickett!”

“I ’spect your tenant farmer done it. Allowin’ *him* near them kids was askin’ the wolf to play with the lambs.”

“Lafeat was headed to his shack. He was *never* alone with her.”

“Don’t be so cotton-pickin’ sure.” He leaned over the girl, to him a rare jewel who jumped her skipping rope at pepper speed, played pigs-in-the-pen quicker than he chipped ice, and topped his grating “San Antonio Rose” with her piquant “Mairzy Doats.” He lowered his gruff voice. “Tell that cropper to keep his weevil-grubbin’ hands off her, or I’ll...”

Wade Delahunt entered, his lantern jaw stiffening. “Mrs. Lajoie?

Willie's in custody now. Just got word on my radio."

"That's plumb dandy," broke in Roscoe. "But what about...?"

"Couldn't charge Lafeat. Witnesses saw him elsewhere. Besides, Shoofly Doughty heard a gunshot. Lafeat might've been the *target*."

"Around those kids?" argued Fernia. "Surely that fathead heard a backfiring car. *Please* don't let this get printed in the papers."

Delahunt doffed his fedora. "We're holding down the stopper on negative publicity."



Forty minutes earlier, twenty-six blocks away, sunlight was slanting through new-bloomed wisteria over Tanjie's clotted blood. Except for the pigeons pecking at the party's leavings and her cat yawning under the massive black walnut, Maison Lajoie stood silent.

Dewain Kittrell paused outside the alley gate. His brown eyes, so receptive to the natural world, so blind to society's temporal affairs, held warm, smoky-quartz undertones. He watched two catbirds play peekaboo in the flowering plum. Then he sneaked to the fishpond.

At first Dewain overlooked the bloodstains, for the solitude was distracting. Glancing south, he noticed the double-rocker swing that had attracted the party's guests like a magnet. Farther on, hoofprints indicated the oval track where an aging plowhorse had given them rides. To his west, balloons and streamers formed a green-and-gold medley, while a Donkey Party game lay scattered near the dovecote. Facing north, sensing the mansion's unreal quietude, he expected a wizened face to peer from a window like a gargoyle. East, past the curtained French doors, he linked an imaginary line to his lookout on the water-tower catwalk.

He wanted to see the goldfishes, but the toppled birdbath, broken flowerpots, and trampled aquatic plants troubled him. Turning to go, he saw a green ribbon dangling from a wisteria vine. His reach for the article lowered his Roy Rogers binoculars to the ledge's cypress plank, whose drops of dried gore sent him running back to the plum tree where, shaking off a chill, he examined his discovery, a lustrous strip of apple-green taffeta marked *TNL*. The monogram teased his memory, but he made no further connection.

The catbirds skulked after caterpillars in the beer-yellow light, the

dusky chestnut-red of their tail coverts reminding Dewain of the bloodstains. Pocketing the ribbon, he sped down the alley, unaware of Roscoe Bowdre searching for his bolt-action rifle.

Tuesday, March 23, 1948 *In the same murky chamber, waves lap at a wooden shore. And with cold, eidetic clarity, the geometric jumble returns—oblong bedsheet, triangular sail, revolving wheel.*

An eggshell cracks and a duckling is hatched, its feathers lemon velvet in the swirling mist. The mother pecks at a flickering scrim, blind to enfolding shadows as she fades and vanishes. The tableau shifts to a rocking boat, and faces blur on a sea of red—iceman, shy boy, jittery Lafeat, wild-eyed Elmore.

A grotesque form materializes from darkness, fishlike, threshing, stalking through a labyrinth of lavender blossoms, mouth flanked by whiplike barbels, gills throbbing. Then the duckling transforms into the dreamer herself, immersed in cloves and resinous soap.

The walls converge—and she is drowning, lily pads her shroud.

Saturday, March 27, 1948 *Forgotten? Repressed memory?* Fernia stepped away from her sleeping daughter. Discovering Roscoe in a corridor that reeked disinfectant, she reported, “Tanjie’s better, but doesn’t remember...” She looked away, flustered.

A slow grin curled his seamed lips. “A right spunky gal, Fernia.”

She eyed him askance. “So that despicable trash, Willie Prickett, goes scot-free? What if he snoops around Tanjie again? She needs a daddy to protect her.”

“Maybe. But we’ll wrangle with *that* idea later.”

“Just a reminder,” Fernia said, fidgeting with a citrine-and-garnet pendant. *Forgotten? She needs to remember, for her own good.* She returned to Tanjie’s room and looked out the window, squinting at a dogwood that in her nearsighted vision resembled cotton candy. The city had various shady characters, though few threatened the public. Doors were kept unlocked, children played games under streetlights, and families listened on radios to *Amos ’n’ Andy* and *Fibber McGee and Molly*. Paris was a decent place; its citizens felt protected. What had gone wrong?

Roscoe sniffed an Easter lily and laid a *Popsicle Pete Fun Book* near the girl. “When’s she leavin’ this coop?” he asked. “And why’s that fisheyed shamus still hangin’ around?”

Fernia turned slowly, crimson lips parting. “She’ll be discharged tomorrow morning. I can’t answer for Mr. Delahunt.”

He nodded tentatively, a subtle glimmer softening his eyes. “It’d pleasure me aplenty to watch her strap on them new skates.” Despite Fernia’s petulant sigh, he suggested, “When she’s back in school I’ll consider that *notion* of yours.”

“I’ll wait with bated breath,” she said, lifting a folded paper from her Whiting and Davis reticule. “Here’s the report. Mild concussion. Dorsolateral contusions. Abrasions to...”

“Hold it,” he said, his work-scarred hands trembling by Tanjie’s bruised ribs. “I don’t need that jibber-jabber.”

Fernia desisted, thinking of Mrs. Vandegraff’s assessment of his rapport with Tanjie. *The iceman fawns after that scamp ’til he spoils her. I’d declare it. And she’s as frisky around him as a kitten in a workbasket.* “You’re special to Tanjie,” she said, biting a hangnail. “The perfect father for her.”

Easter, March 28, 1948 Tanjie stood blinking beneath the hospital’s porte-cochere, hugging a basket of assorted eggs. Fernia remained inside with Roscoe, writing a check to cover expenses. Tanjie saw a girl curiously observing her basket. She had long black hair and a golden complexion. Tanjie picked out her prettiest egg—pink with encircling blue stripes—and offered it. A swarthy man interceded with, “No, Leticia. *Es caridad*. We take no charity from *los ricos*.”

“But, Papá...”

“Do as I say. We have honor. *Mañana* we go to the onion fields. Forget making friends in this town.” Delfino led Leticia away.

Tanjie, mystified, clambered into Roscoe’s red pickup truck, the papillon bows in her pigtails accenting her peach plissé dress. Fernia sat beside her, scrutinizing Our Lady of Victory churchgoers in their holiday finery. Long-legged Elmore, sprawled in the truckbed, fitted a catgut noose around the neck of Tanjie’s bunny. The girl inspected her bandaged forehead in the rearview mirror, and pressed Roscoe’s

forearm. "I had a dream, Mr. Iceman."

Roscoe steered his GMC up Clarksville Street. "A scary one?"

"It was *funny*. I had some polliwogs in a pickle jar, but you were hiding. So I searched the house, but *no-o-o*, no luck. Then behind our birdbath, the holly bushes shook. *Guess* what I said."

He grinned cautiously. "I give up."

"I *see-e-e* you. A big wampus, blowing smoke rings."

He snorted, clearing his nostrils. "What else, Tanjie?"

"Come out, you fat mudcat. You can't fool your honey bunch."

Roscoe whooped and slapped his knee and grated two lines from "Tweedle-O-Twill." Elmore, lying forgotten below the rear window, began choking the rabbit beside his *Plastic Man* comic book. Tanjie turned on the radio and piped a current jingle: *Dad's Old Fashioned Root Beer!* Fernia, who had smashed her eyeglasses in a guilt-ridden fit, gazed impassively at the city's burgeoning landscapes. When the blue asphalt roof of Maison Lajoie loomed ahead, she unclipped her mother-of-pearl earrings, her face fading to the pallor of marble.

Tuesday, March 30, 1948 Dewain had lost his father in 1942 during the shelling of Bataan. Five years later his mother had succumbed to a cerebral aneurysm. Finding Roscoe's rifle snagged in a catch basin by the county hospital, he notified his guardian uncle, Neil Rainbolt, who contacted Delahunt.

"*Sure*, I knew it was missin'," Roscoe admitted, stepping outside a duplex apartment that resembled a woodrat's nest. "Was I obliged to tell the cops?"

"At the hospital I mentioned a possible gunshot," Delahunt said.

"Here's the lowdown," Roscoe contended. "I parked my pickup north of the premises and carried a present in the house for Tanjie. When Willie showed up, I hustled back and got my rifle for safety's sake. Fernia don't allow guns, so I hid it in the bushes, but the maid got to jawin' with me. After we went indoors Tanjie screamed like a jaybird and ran to the fishpond just before a firecracker exploded. Now hear me straight. She caught Elmore messin' with my rifle. He busted an M-80 to scare her. Tanjie's memory's flown south, but I'll wring the truth outa that cotton-pickin' boy. Elmore ditched my gun

wherever you found it.”

“It figures you’d know your own gunshot,” Delahunt shrewdly asserted. *No pyrotechnic remains were found.* “It’s established that Willie was at Shoofly’s ice-cream cart when the explosion went off. If you saw somebody else...”

Roscoe propped a foot on his pickup’s bumper. “You’re makin’ this a case? There *was* another man. *Married*, but bird-doggin’!”



Bruce McQuade, an A & P butcher, could not deny stopping briefly at the house, but offered Delahunt little more. “I was puttin’ broilers and chops in Fernia’s icebox when Roscoe came in with a package, but no gun. I ducked out the back door and hoofed it to the alley. All them kids hollerin’ around Lafeat’s broke-down dobbin! But I never heard no gunshot.”

Wednesday, March 31, 1948 *A little nostalgia*, Delahunt reflected, recalling a childhood that had closed when World War I began. He parked under an Indian-cigar tree beside the compress’s block-long warehouse, yearning to join two boys who lagged taws for marbles. Minutes earlier he had offered Mrs. Lajoie and her peppy daughter a ride from J. G. Wooten School, named after a Kentucky gentleman who was superintendent of the city’s school system for thirty-seven years. The mother, wearing new eyeglasses and a black, felted-loden coat, had accepted guardedly. Peering across the milkweed meadow now, he saw Tanjie skating on the sidewalk in her dress of tiger-lily orange, while the agitated woman paced the veranda.

Roscoe braked his ice wagon under a sycamore, and then hopped down and tossed the girl a coin. When she climbed on his shoulders, the scene for Delahunt became a pantomime. Popping the “bronco” with his hat, she lurched crazily as he bucked. He stood her on the sidewalk when Fernia reached the wrought-iron gate. Elmore sprang up from a boxwood hedge and snatched the coin. Tanjie tumbled in a pratfall, skates flashing.

The marble shooters, Dewain Kittrell and his cousin of twelve, Gordie Wilcoxon, jumped up from their picking-plums contest and watched Roscoe warm his son’s britches with a hand-tooled belt.

VANISHING STARLIGHT

They resumed playing when the man chipped an ice block and toted it into the house. Elmore lighted a cigarette and shook a fist at Tanjie.

Delahunt heard a flat twang and saw Lafeat, who, walking home, mouthed the lyre-shaped frame of a jew's-harp, teeth biting the steel tongue, a jittery finger plucking the sounding bar. The sharecropper tipped his hat, somber eyes averted from Delahunt's deadpan stare.



After supper, Delahunt returned to his lookout, pondering the riddle from two angles.

First, physical. Forty people had been at or near the party: Fernia and Tanjie, their tipling maid Percille, twenty-five other children, and four chaperones, counting the washerwoman. Bruce McQuade had delivered meats and then soon departed. Later came Roscoe and his reckless son Elmore, plus Lafeat. Passersby included Willie and his deaf-mute ward Maudie Quirke, the ice-cream vendor Shoofly Doughty, and his witless sidekick Rubby Dubby. No outsiders had been observed. Festivities were winding down when Lafeat, taking Diablo to the toolshed, was wheeled into giving the children rides. Tanjie, being the honoree, went first; then she sneaked off expecting a present from Roscoe. Lafeat headed toward his shack, leaving the horse behind, while Percille tottered to her shanty on nearby Orange Street. Fernia, upset by Tanjie's absence, caught Willie pawing the half-submerged girl right after the gunshot sounded. She was lifting Tanjie from the water when Roscoe hurried to the fishpond and sent Elmore after a blanket. Guests dissipated in stunned silence. Roscoe drove unconscious Tanjie to the hospital, Fernia attending. Shoofly and Rubby Dubby testified in Willie's behalf.

Second, mental. Why had fastidious Fernia neglected the bloody bedspread? Why would she suspect Willie? Why did the girl recall virtually nothing? What clues lay hidden in her nightmares? Had her trauma triggered retrograde amnesia? Yet memory was sometimes a selective matter, a defense mechanism. Had Tanjie *chosen* to forget? Why were her abrasions and bruises unexplained?

Lighting a Pall Mall with his Dunhill Rollalite, he backtracked to the sobering intrusion when the washerwoman, girdle straining, face pink as a canned ham, had waddled up to his Frazer, her raspy voice

tempting him to claw the upholstery.

“Yonder’s an admirable man,” she harped, watching Roscoe kick at Elmore’s retreating backside. “Keeping that ruffian in line.”

“I disagree, ma’am. He’s turning that boy into a snake.”

“Humph! He’s just the gent that willful girl needs for guidance. Fernia can’t leash the naughty little romp. If Roscoe doesn’t lose his grit, I’d bet he pops the question.”

He had felt his craggy face tighten. “Meaning?”

“Wedding bells. By the end of spring. I’d declare it.”

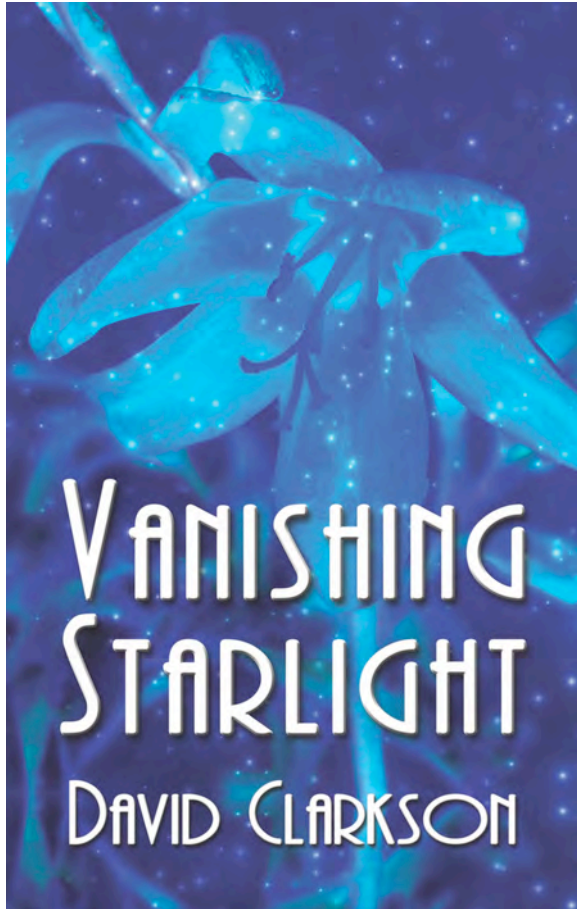
The rumor had grated like a hacksaw, but it was the dispatch at his courthouse office that ruined his coffee break. He switched on the interior light, extracting from the glove compartment a yellow document that, transcribed from a Teletype dated a decade earlier at Jefferson, Texas, leaped at his throat like a cottonmouth—**Man Not Held in Marion County Drownings.**

Monitoring the darkened mansion, he pondered the “accidental” deaths of Roscoe’s wife, Marvadean, and his stepdaughter of seven, Belle Starr Spraggs, in a gully-washer north of Caddo Lake. Elmore, aged one year and ten months, had “luckily” survived. A regrettable footnote added that Marvadean, during her final travail, had brought forth a third casualty, a girl.

Now Percille, clumping along, was singing “Yellow Dog Blues,” a standard inspired by a short-lived logging train on the Yazoo Delta Railroad. *Harmless*, he concluded for the dozenth time.

Bone-tired at ten o’clock, legs numbed, the detective saw Roscoe leave the area. Driving home, he rehashed his hunches. Bruce, Lafeat, Willie: their alibis. Fernia’s suspicious letter opener, her bloodstained bedspread. Next, Elmore, a cowardly bully. Finally, Roscoe.

For reasons that were snowballing, his blood ran ice-cold.



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