

# An Accidental Pope

A MYSTERY IN FIVE BOXES

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FarHaven  press

PEQUOT LAKES, MINNESOTA



*For my beloved son, Jon Nathan Casper,  
who left this broken world  
of a fallen Paradise  
as this story was being written*



*There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns—there are things we do not know we don't know.*

—DONALD RUMSFELD

BOX ONE

**A BOX OF CRACKERJACKS**

*Not everything that rises must converge.*

–VINCENT VESUVIO

## CLIPPINGS

### **TWIN RIVERS DAILY CLARION**

**May 7**

#### **Body Discovered Behind Hotel Paradise**

During a routine patrol of the derelict Hotel Paradise, Twin Rivers police and Paradise County deputies discovered the body of a young man in an alley near the hotel fire escape.

While an investigation continues, the area is being treated as a crime scene. Identification is being withheld pending notification of next of kin.

No further information is available at this time.

**May 7**

**Note** on East Pendle Street apartment door near Notre Dame University

*Phil, all your friends are looking for you. Nobody seems to know anything. Mock Trials begin next week. Let us know where you are. Jake and Brian*

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**TWIN RIVERS DAILY CLARION**

**May 9**

**Foul Play 'Ruled Out' in Hotel Fire Escape Fatality**

**May 10**

**Note** on East Pendle Street apartment door near Notre Dame University

*Phil, if we don't hear from you by tomorrow morning, we are calling the police. Brian, Jake, and Paula*

## Porky and Harriet White

Wilbur and Harriet White were one of Twin Rivers' most conspicuous couples. Apart from separations during work hours, one would seldom be seen without the other, pushing grocery carts, sitting on benches in the mall holding hands, on the same side of a café booth, and out on a dance floor together wherever a band played. Sunday mornings were an exception: Harriet attended Mass at St. Callixtus and sang in its choir. Wilbur, a determined atheist, would meet her in front of the church afterwards, and off they would go to a café for breakfast.

Whoever thought of calling cops *flatfoots* did not have Wilbur in mind. For that matter, whoever nicknamed him Porky did not have Porky in mind. He was as trim and nimble as a champion welterweight boxer. In another world than Twin Rivers, instead of wearing a police badge, he might have worn gloves and won by a TKO in the third round. He might have donned tights and been a ballet dancer. When he twirled Harriet around on a dance floor, other couples would drop out to watch and applaud when the spectacle was over. Add to this Wilbur's skill as an amateur juggler, good enough to entertain at community events. Here was somebody who wasn't the typical town cop and wasn't a typical guy nicknamed Porky.

When he wasn't twirling Harriet and lofting beanbags for local Scout troops and fundraisers, Porky used his dancing skills and juggler's coordination in police investigative work. In place of Harriet, he twirled suspects and suspicious situations. In place of beanbags, he had three or four questions in the air at once, barely handling any of them

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longer than it took to flip them around in his investigative mind—or in a suspect's face.

Harriet White worked in the background of her husband's investigations. Credit for her crime-solving deductions went to Porky. Personal satisfaction came her way. She thought of detective work as a hobby: untangling a mystery was like filling in the last gaps of a jigsaw puzzle, or reciting old jump-rope songs to the rhythm of Porky's juggling. The steady rhythm helped her think. In the public world of Twin Rivers, she was the soprano soloist in Bernard Passmore's 'award-winning' St. Callixtus choir. Otherwise she worked as a veterinary assistant at a local pet clinic. As a victim of epilepsy subject to occasional seizures, she was unable to drive. She depended on Porky to ferry her from point to point in daily routines.

Recently, she discovered a new hobby in writing the history of St. Callixtus Church for its sesquicentennial celebration. The church archive had become yet another ferry point. The archive held mysteries of its own, some the equal of those Porky encountered and brought home.

Women with first names of three or more syllables often wind up with nicknames. Harriet insisted on being Harriet, no matter how many times it was spelled wrong. Only Porky got away with something else. In private, he often called her Wren. No one loved to hear her sing more than Porky did. It was almost enough to make him a churchgoer.

## Rain or Shine, Suicide or Murder?

On a mid-spring Saturday morning of the sort requiring both sunglasses and an umbrella, Porky White's eyes were riveted skyward to the fifth floor of The Paradise, a derelict hotel. His thoughts wandered between suicide and murder.

Fifty feet above him, another Twin Rivers, Minnesota officer outside an open window leaned over the railing of a rusty fire escape. The two of them had been in this alley several times during the past week, each time with the same questions flipping around in Porky's mind.

This was his first time there with his juggling beanbags, which, at his direction, were being dropped and tossed in various ways from the fire escape's zigzagging stairway. It was a curious sight, two cops appearing to play with beanbags behind a dilapidated brick building boarded up on its lower floors and with broken windows on its upper ones.

In fact, the scene had attracted an audience: a man watching the game from a red roadster parked beyond the alley; another man, of substantial girth, pacing within a grove of honey locust trees between St. Callixtus Church and the hotel. The man in the roadster expected to be noticed. The man in the trees thought himself concealed. Porky knew and was known to both.

Sitting in the roadster was Dusty Dwyer, owner of the Purple Palace, a strip club as old as its hotel neighbor. Half hidden beyond the trees was Bernard Passmore, St. Callixtus' choir director, of burgeoning silhouette, unmistakable as any thumbprint. He appeared to be reading a book, a church hymnal held upside down as he cast sideways glances down the alley.

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Each colorful beanbag lying scattered about in the alley marked Porky's attempt to answer one of his questions:

First, was it possible either to jump from there or be pushed and land where the young man's body had been found?

Second, if he had been pushed, were his injuries consistent with a body colliding on jutting parts of the fire escape in its plummet to the alley below? The coroner's report had been inconclusive.

If he leaped, how far to clear the fire escape entirely? Porky removed his sunglasses to study a yellow, chalk-painted form on alley pavement. The form looked washed-out after several spring showers this past week. Its location bothered him. None of his beanbags were close to where the body had been found.

The suicide note had also missed its intended mark. Carefully folded and tucked into a jacket pocket, it looked like a fake.

Suicide notes were supposed to resemble messages scrawled on restroom walls or left as last-minute reminders under magnets on refrigerator doors. They always had at least one spelling mistake. A torn corner, or a dog-ear would clinch it. Porky had seen a number of such notes in his investigative work, last words scribbled by people angry, raging, half out of their minds, and revenging themselves on the world for screwing up their lives.

Carefully printed in block letters, Phillip Fowler's read like a rehearsed speech in act three of a high school class play. It used indented paragraphs, and even included a bit of Latin legal lingo, as if somebody had tried to imagine what a law school student would say at such a critical moment. Here was the fabrication of a perfectionist with tunnel vision.

"And about as convincing as those done-up pooches at a dog show," Harriet had said as he dropped her off for an early morning shift at the pet clinic. Her eyes twinkled as they always did when she imagined something amusing.

In the hotel alley an hour later, Porky said, "*It's about as convincing as a done-up-pooch at a dog show.*"

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Officer Charlie Cook nodded, pretending to understand. He was used to it. Porky's analogies, as an old saying goes, often went in one of Charlie's ears and out the other without gaining much traction.

Also too contrived was the blue windbreaker jacket bearing the victim's monogram draped over the open window casing as if the victim had removed it to dive into a swimming pool, not fifty feet into an alley.

"A swimming pool?" said Charlie.

"You can bet on it," said Porky.

From where he stood, everything pointed to a murder contrived to look otherwise. Whoever killed the young man had both a high opinion of his own intelligence and a view of police work bordering on mockery. In taking too much care, the killer had been careless.

Other thoughts Porky would keep to himself. For the time being, this would officially remain a suicide case. Thinking he had pulled it off, the killer would become complacent. A criminal thinking he got away with something was a cop's best friend.

Having run out of beanbags, Charlie had trundled down the fire escape, and was looking down on his boss from its last step.

"Do you want to try it again?"

They had gathered the beanbags twice before, with Charlie, overweight and breathless, struggling up the fire escape to send them down in various ways.

"I've seen enough," said Porky, without revealing what he had seen. "I need to ask that priest Vesuvio a few more questions. The funeral is today, isn't it?"

Charlie looked at his watch. "In about two hours, except Vesuvio won't be here for it. Another padre was sent in."

"What's that all about?"

Charlie shrugged, hung by his hands from the bottom of the fire escape, and landed in the alley, several yards from where the body had been found.

"You're too old and too fat to be trying that stunt, Charlie, but my point exactly—a guy simply lets go; he lands where you are. If he is pushed or makes a flying leap, he

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lands somewhere in this area.” Porky waved a black baton hanging from his belt. “No way does he land there. You can bet on it.” He pointed to the faded, yellow chalk form.

“Maybe someone moved the body,” suggested Charlie. “Maybe he crawled that far.”

“Dead men don’t crawl. This guy died instantly if we can believe the coroner’s report—‘blunt force trauma consistent with a fall of more than twenty feet.’ Of course, our county coroner should have retired twenty years ago, and lately it’s like he earns his living by making mistakes. Keep that to yourself, Charlie, like I never said it.”

And Porky kept to himself the suspicion that Phillip Fowler had been killed somewhere else, with his body dumped in the hotel alley, staged to look like a suicide.

“Charlie, you’re a Catholic, right?”

“Right!”

“Is the coroner a Catholic?”

“Yup. He and his wife sit three pews in front of me and my wife every Sunday.”

“By the way, did Corrie get over those migraines you mention now and then?”

“She’s doing all right. Thanks for asking, Porky.”

“Right,” said Porky, casting sideways glances, two or three, a skill known to lawmen in detective novels.

Having gorged himself on a youthful diet of such novels, Porky was an encouraging example of a man who grew up to become exactly what he dreamt of being. He knew that great detective heroes always knew more than they said, and sometimes said things they knew to be false just to cast a net for the unsuspecting and complacent criminal.

Like those detective heroes, he also noticed things that ordinary folk missed, but he would wait till the right moment to say something about it, that moment being when everyone else’s attention had drifted away. He glanced toward the church apse beyond the rangy locust trees at the end of the alley, then the other way toward the parking lot of the strip club.

“And I would like to know who’s been circling around here overnight on a motorcycle.” Porky pointed to loose

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gravel displaced on the perimeter of the crime scene and darkened by an early morning shower. Any alert detective would have noticed.

“Somebody colorblind who can’t read.” Prior to this, Charlie had not noticed, but whenever he partnered with the redoubtable Porky, he had to pretend. He picked up a fallen section of yellow crime-scene tape and wrapped it around an orange traffic cone as if all along he had been thinking about the motorcycle.

“Or somebody with something on his mind,” said Porky. “—Speaking of which, I’m going to have another word with the guy who runs that strip joint. Guys who run dives like that always know more than they say the first time. You can bet on it. You go over to the church and check around. Maybe the new padre will be there by now. Maybe somebody will know something. But, if you happen to run into him, ignore the fat man who’s been keeping an eye on us from those trees. He’s my wife’s choir director. I wouldn’t want to rile him. He might keep me waiting for her while she sings solos after Wednesday practices. I hate eating late. Makes my stomach hurt.”

“An ulcer?”

“You might say so.” Porky loped down the alley toward a nightclub called the *Purple Palace*. Too many unanswered questions also made his stomach hurt. He had a few for the choir director, but those could wait.



## A Slippery Fish

“Looking for me?” said the man in the red roadster, rolling down his window as Porky approached.

Wearing a white turtleneck beneath a dark blazer, sunglasses propped atop his head, Dusty Dwyer might have been an advertisement in a men’s magazine from forty years earlier.

“Dusty, I hope you enjoyed our little beanbag fun,” said Porky who fancied having the exceptional peripheral vision of all legendary detectives.

“Reminds me of an act I staged in Chicago before I bought this joint years ago. *All My Sins* was the name of my Chicago club.”

“Sins?” Porky knew he was in big city territory with that one.

“Yeah, sins, if you know what I mean, like honey for flies, or a corpse for maggots. You wouldn’t have heard of All My Sins, but it was big in Chicago, very big, mortal sins you might say. I wanted to give this Purple Palace joint the same name when I bought it years ago, but subtlety is the way things go around here. As an old choir boy, I know purple is the color for Lent, Advent, and penitence. This town is forever in Lent or Advent or feeling bad about something, so I thought the name Purple Palace would catch on, if you know what I mean.”

“Has it?” Porky retreated a step as if the mere thought of all those sins might be radioactive.

“Not really. With so much raw porn available on internet, strip shows are about as enticing as PTA meetings. Pouring booze is what keeps me in business these days.”

“You were a choir boy?”

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“Yeah, I can get quite nostalgic about that part of my life, growing up in Chicago. Ask me about it sometime. My church, run by a fusty old mugger of a priest, kept using Latin years after all the other churches used English. I don’t know how he got away with it, but I really enjoyed that old Latin Mass hocus-pocus—had a musical ring. I can still recite some of it, and sometimes do when I can’t sleep—stuff like *juventutem meam* and *mea maxima culpa*. I like the sound of it. Beats counting sheep, if you know what I mean.”

“Can’t sleep?” Porky made a mental note about a guilty conscience.

Dusty was ahead of him, reading the cop’s mind. “No, not because of anything I’d done that might get me thrown in the clink, but I have restless leg syndrome. My legs keep kicking under the covers just about the time I’m nodding off.

“—Anyway, as I was saying, sins are sins wherever, and there’s good money in sin. Sin is like a currency you can spend anywhere, even around this hick town. All the cops knew about my Chicago club. A lot of mafia types hung out there, not the chief honchoes, but the heavy-lifters who took out contracts on squealers, and did protection racket hits, extortion and all that stuff. They weren’t the brains. They just did what the brains higher up told them to do. I don’t suppose you run into much extortion and protection racket stuff around here.”

Dusty glanced down the alley toward the locust tree grove and the church. He made it sound like a question whose answer lay in that direction.

This was enough to convince Porky that Dusty knew something. Porky had a competent lawman’s knowledge of getting people to talk by not saying much. He stayed silent. His face said nothing. He could appear to follow when he was leading. He could play dumb. All this aside, getting Dusty to talk was easy; the hard part was getting him to say anything that went anywhere.

Dusty seemed to be enjoying himself.

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When it came to playing games and baiting hooks, he was more than a match for what he regarded as a small-town cop with a fantasy life. He launched into a lecture for Porky's benefit:

"You know how the protection racket goes.... If somebody has 'the goods' on somebody who has a lot to lose if the secret ever gets out, the guy with plenty to hide gets squeezed, if you know what I mean.

"Pretty soon desperation sets in, especially if someone even bigger has a lot at stake, and 'bigger' knows about the guy's secret. If a guy has a family on one side, and on the other, something else he cares about a lot, like maybe his career and reputation, he gets split right down the middle. Then anything can happen. It could happen here. It happens all the time in Chicago. It's like being drawn-and-quartered. You know, tying horses to a man's legs and arms, and running them off in different directions. Lots of blood gets splashed—I knew a man in Chicago ... these days they use motorcycles instead of horses, works the same way. Ask me about him sometime. All My Sins makes this place look like a kiddie show."

"The Purple Palace, a kiddie show?" Porky glanced down at his badge. It seemed to have become a plastic prize in a box of something like Crackerjacks, the large economy size.

"Yeah, a kiddie show, if you know what I mean. But I was ready for a change of scenery, so I sold out and moved here. This is just what I was looking for, a quiet, small town with lots of fresh air, only an occasional murder, and people easily shocked.

"If I did the stuff here that was our main attraction there, you'd shut me down, officer. In Chicago, I even had a couple of cops who worked part-time as male strippers, off duty of course. That's Chicago. You could never be sure what side of the law anybody was on, and sometimes they could be on all sides at once.

"We ran acts seven nights a week, the Sabbath and all that. Sunday nights could be our busiest. People, guys and

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gals, would come piling in after the big football games. You would have sworn they were on their way to church.

“—Speaking of which, would you believe that the pope showed up at our Chicago church when I was a choir boy? I got to meet him, along with the other kids in our boys’ choir. Then my voice changed, but anyway the pope blessed all of us choir boys on the spot, and you can’t get a blessing that beats that. I think it still does me some good, brings luck, if you know what I mean.”

Dusty spewed facts and stories like a device bubbling air in a fish tank.

Porky made mental notes—*blood, choir boy, Latin, a pope, the fake suicide note*. Dusty moved up a notch on his suspect list. Guys like Dusty always talked in riddles, but once in a while, they let something slip.

“Latin, you say? You know Latin?”

“Yeah, years ago.” Dusty grew wistful.

“Lawyers sometimes use that stuff, don’t they?” Porky pretended not to know for sure.

“Yeah, lawyers, priests, and thugs—they all know Latin. Thugs especially like *habeas corpus, corpus delicti*, and *cherchez la femme*—of course that’s French. We choir boys never got to say *corpus delicti* in church, but around Chicago gangsters it has a sweet sound. Without a body, there’s nothing to pin on anyone, but sometimes even if there is a body.... Lots of bodies wind up in city landfills. That’s one of the reasons gangsters are so much into running garbage collection businesses in places like...”

“Chicago?” said Porky.

“Yeah, Chicago,” said Dusty. “Up here in Twin Rivers, there’s nothing but amateurs where bodies are concerned. Like that one in the hotel alley.”

“Are you saying that was a crime?”

“*Caveat emptor*—buyer beware! Any con-artist recites that in his sleep with a smile on his face. —But you’re the inspector. I’m just a next-door neighbor, from Chicago. As I was saying, things are one way in Chicago, another way here, but I’ve never seen cops playing with beanbags before, so I figure you must be onto something.”

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Porky glanced back up the alley where his sidekick's elongated shadow had melted into a portion of the locust tree grove adjacent the church parking lot.

"You don't happen to own a motorcycle, do you?"

"A Harley," said Dusty.

He squinted at Porky, the sort of narrow-eyed squint that was his specialty from long experience, sizing up a situation. He had two bikes, one he rode and one he kept for old time's sake.

"And an *Indian Classic*, officer, in case that rings a bell with you."

"This reminds me to ask if you ever heard of a young Indian woman named Melody, last seen in Chicago?"

Porky had just made one of his fastest interrogation moves ever. Though a shower was beginning, he lowered his sunglasses over his eyes. Professional pride gleamed there. It was Porky's turn to squint.

"Melody, yeah, a great name for a stripper—Melody. I've known one or two who went by that name, back in Chicago, part of their acts of course."

Dusty was equal to a cop's best moves. He could sprint like a jack rabbit in a greyhound race. He never said no when there was a way of saying yes. He never flinched at a clutch moment in the game. He had been the star pinch-hitter on his choir boys' baseball team. He had met cops climbing through windows with a drink in each hand, while other cops—off duty—scrambled out windows in the back. He had faced down mobsters who might take out contracts on his head, and outlived them in the end. He had passed well beyond the meaning of fearless and cool as a cucumber.

Any of his strippers might have agreed as they shuttled between Chicago and Twin Rivers. In their worlds, Dusty knew every rope; he was safe harbor, haven, a future, and as good as a one-way bus ticket to college.

"The name Melody reminds me of something else about Chicago. Ask me sometime—when it's not raining, maybe while your wife's at her choir practice. There might be a

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show on—lots of interesting types on display during my shows—no charge for you of course, on the house.”

“Are you talking about your strippers, and maybe an Indian girl now and then?”

“No, it’s the guys who show up to watch—that’s the real freak show. Ask me about it sometime—like I said, when it’s not raining.”

“I intend to.” Porky, jaw set, managed a steely-eyed look.

The shower had stopped, two minutes ago.

Porky pivoted on his heels and danced away toward the hotel.

As a parting shot of Latin, Dusty left Porky with this: “You probably know *errata* means mistakes, a list of mistakes, officer. Us choir boys had one list for the confessional; another list for surviving out on the streets. Word gets around, you might say. Ask me about it sometime.”

“You can bet on it,” said Porky, over his shoulder and two steps down the alley.

*Choir practice? How did he know Wren sings in the choir? The guy knows more about me than I know about him, and I’ve questioned him twice.*

Among other things, Dusty had given him new respect for Chicago cops juggling suspicions in a city full of slippery fish like Dusty Dwyer.

## Aloysius Brandy 100 Proof

Father Aloysius Brandy's name had high alcohol content. The old priest himself had never been known to be tipsy, despite parishioners' repeated efforts in that direction whenever he was invited to a wedding reception or a Knights of Columbus gathering. Throw in Father Brandy's broad facial features, a bit of a pug nose, dark-rimmed glasses, hair on the furry side turning white, and he could be imagined as an Alpine dog with brandy cask rescuing travelers lost in blizzards.

While the name Brandy fell off most lips with the smoothness of a worthy cognac, his given name proved tricky to spell and pronounce. Since almost no one could say Aloysius, as a youth he was known simply as Brandy. Even his parents called him that. Whatever they had intended, the name Aloysius led him into a lifetime of annoying difficulties, too small to be worthy of complaint and too inevitable to ignore.

In his many years as a parish priest in the sprawling northern Minnesota diocese of North Port, he was bound to become peevisish from so much pronouncing and spelling of *Aloysius* every time a parishioner murdered it or a secretary needed it for a church bulletin. Nor did it help that Aloysius rhymed with delicious, suspicious, auspicious, vicious, and doing-the-dishes, none of which were spelled the same as Aloysius or—except for his church soup kitchen work—fit a life better described as *steady, dutiful, and determined*.

And so it came to pass, on a brisk spring morning, His Eminence Norman St. Claire, Bishop of North Port, with scant explanation, sent him on the road at half past three....

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With his mongrel Fred in the back seat of his timeworn sedan, Brandy began a trip of almost two hundred miles into western Minnesota, Ojibwe Indian reservation country, his destination Twin Rivers, the Parish of St. Callixtus. He had last been there as a young priest. Forty years having slipped by, he had never been back. St. Callixtus had become a distant world beyond several horizons and a lifetime of experience.

At about the same time, pigeons roosting overnight on St. Callixtus Church ledges took flight toward a river and then circled back to shelter once more on its illuminated façade. Far below them, what might have been a cannonade quieted to the imagined purring of a large jungle cat. A rectory garage door lifted, and a black motorcycle emerged, paused while its black-clad driver adjusted his helmet strap, and then moved slowly down an alley toward a circular barrier of traffic cones and yellow tape bearing the words *Crime Scene Do Not Cross*.

The words, repeated in sets, had been there for several days. Yet the driver, who had seen them before, seemed to read them as if for the first time, and as if, illuminated by his cycle lights, they contained a different message. He dismounted, removed his helmet, and stood with head bowed over a human form outlined in chalk on the alley pavement and sand. It might have been someone he knew long ago, a memory fading into memories yet more distant.

Five minutes passed before he turned away, circled the scene on his motorcycle, parked in front of the church, and took a skeleton key from his pocket.

The empty church shuddered as its heavy main door closed behind him. He made his way in darkness down a familiar aisle. His hard-soled cycling boots echoed on its granite floor. A few vigil lights flickered their last from banked rows on a cast-iron stand. In the cavernous darkness, a red sacristy light had been for him the last light of yesterday and first light of another daybreak. Minutes later, he came out a church side entrance, leaving that door unlocked as well.

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Mounting his motorcycle, Father Vincent Vesuvio sped east under a morning sky starlit between patches of fleecy, gray cloud.



## How Many Roads, Cardinal Crackerjack?

Lake Superior lay at Brandy's back under a blue-grey fog-bank from which solitary North Port City shore lights glimmered. Then the highway took him over a ridge, away from the lake, and across the southwestern portion Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range, folk-singer Bob Dylan's country.

Ahead of Brandy were familiar towns not far from where he and Dylan were born—the same year—hard-faced mining communities, now asleep with their traffic signals blinking over empty thoroughfares, and their town cops parked in front of all-night cafés, scenes from Dylan's songs Brandy knew by heart. He sometimes hummed to himself, *Blowin' in the Wind*. Brandy couldn't carry a note, but that never bothered Dylan fans.

A waning crescent moon settled behind clouds of an approaching front. In his rearview mirror, the sky began to brighten with the purple and mauve tints of early dawn. Halfway to his destination, he turned on his car radio, with weather in mind. He had by then driven into scattered squalls rushing east to meet him. Rain splattered on his windshield, became more insistent, stopped, and then started again. He had forgotten to bring an umbrella, but undertakers always had umbrellas.

Instead of the local forecast for northern Minnesota, the radio brought a familiar voice from long ago, that of his grade-school classmate Jack "Crackerjack" Cudahy, now the formidable Cardinal John Cudahy stationed in Rome, seven time zones and what seemed a lifetime away, with singer Bob Dylan somewhere in between.

The three of them had once shared the same obscure life on Minnesota's bleak Iron Range. With decades behind

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them, Brandy alone remained obscure. Dylan still looked like a youth wearing funny hats with hair hanging in his eyes. Jack wore a cardinal's hat with an eye on his future. Brandy had once seen a picture of Crackerjack, as an archbishop and not yet a cardinal, sharing an outdoor stage with Dylan, holding Dylan's guitar upside down and pretending to play it. Jack had a great smile; Dylan had a great frown.

Now, Crackerjack was a close confidant of popes, with Rome some days seeming upside down. Dylan had just won the Nobel Prize for Literature. What could Crackerjack do to top that? Brandy, on the road to Twin Rivers, could think of only one thing.

Fred awoke with a bark and pressed his nose between the front seats. He must have known something was up. Indeed it was, for the pope had died overnight, and Cardinal Cudahy was being interviewed from the Vatican for his reaction.

Jack's voice, once bantering on a school playground, now brimmed with authority and self-confidence of the sort great stature affords. Brandy had never gotten used to the idea, because Jack for him remained as he had always been when he last saw him, a madcap boy nicknamed Crackerjack whose tousled, red hair flew in the wind.

Whatever could or could not have been imagined back then, whatever may be believed or doubted, Jack had raced up the Church ladder two rungs at a time to become known as the *Iron Cardinal*, one of the most important of that flock. Now, with the pope deceased, and a papal conclave days from beginning, Cardinal Cudahy was among the few whose views would be newsworthy.

The reporter suggested that the Minnesota-born cardinal himself might be a dark-horse candidate to be elected the next pope.

"No horse in the world could be that dark," Cardinal Cudahy laughed. "The Church is fortunate to have a number of highly-qualified men to choose from as this conclave begins. Protocol prevents me from mentioning names, but

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we can all be confident that the Holy Spirit will guide us as a worthy successor is chosen.”

“Thank you for sharing your views with our listeners, your Eminence.”

“Eminence, perhaps, but far from *imminent*,” said the Cardinal with a parting chuckle.

*And the same old Jack, quick as a whistle and quick with a laugh*, thought Brandy. Jack had always been smooth with words. He could even whistle better than any of the other boys. And it was Jack’s old laugh, perfectly at ease with his shoelaces untied, unchanged since their days in a schoolyard thirty miles and fifty-some years from the road Brandy now drove while listening.

*How many roads does a man walk down in a lifetime, Cardinal Crackerjack?*

*How much do old friends change?*

Dylan had not yet announced whether he would accept the Nobel Prize.



## Both *It* and Both Crazy

An hour later, while parked in a highway wayside rest area, Brandy listened long after his boyhood friend had spoken. His voice seemed to reverberate from a radio turned off. He went through Jack's words from beginning to end; and then from there back to an earlier beginning, when he and Jack Cudahy as boys first met during a school recess in the middle of a year, more than half a century ago.

As an awkward boy with an awkward first name, Brandy had been slow on his feet and slow of reflex.

In his first years at All Saints School, before he knew what was happening, with his hands in his pockets, he had been tagged and became *It*. The other boys were faster in every way.

He stayed *It* for the next five years. Without a break, he raced around church and school chasing classmates always dodging and darting just out of reach. Since the school had no playground, sometimes recess games spilled out into the immediate village. Steps leading to the church's main entrance were a haven where no one could tag or be tagged. Brandy could often be found there breathing hard and catching his breath before resuming his hapless chase.

This taught him more patience than most boys his age. He developed the circumspection and dogged determination discovered in some old men in the last years of a long lifetime. He learned to live within his limitations. He learned to think of a church as home, where he could recover from a futile race.

Then out of nowhere Jack Cudahy showed up to challenge much that he had learned. As a prominent cardinal assigned to the Vatican, he was still doing it.

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“You’re *It!*” Brandy tagged Jack at the beginning of the next noon recess.

“Let’s both be *It!*” Jack laughed and tagged him back. Who would have thought? From the very beginning, Jack was always doing the unexpected.

His parents had seemed to move in while the village slept, appearing as if at daybreak, from nowhere, without notice, fanfare, or explanation. They sent—what everyone thought to be—their only child to its Catholic school without themselves joining the parish or connecting themselves to the community in any other way.

Their wealth was evident from the estate they purchased on a hillside whose contours were outlined by high fieldstone walls, too high to peer over. Once the private kingdom of an iron mine owner, its brick mansion, servant’s quarters, horse paddock, and tennis court were hidden within a leafy grove. At all hours, expensive cars with deeply tinted windows came and went through heavy, wrought iron gates. The one taking Jack to school and bringing him home at day’s end appeared to be driven by a chauffeur who would step out gingerly to hold the door for him.

All this led to talk and speculation of the small-town sort. Some people thought Jack’s family came from California, while others thought Pittsburgh with its steel industry. Some thought Jack’s father had invented something important, or perhaps owned a fleet of iron ore boats, or maybe he was a gangster lying low. Somebody heard that Jack’s mom was pregnant.

None of this mattered to Brandy. He soon learned not to ask Jack questions. He would hear too many answers.

But Brandy had been *It* for so long that he could not imagine being anything else, so at Jack’s suggestion, they teamed up. Even when they cornered and tagged a classmate, they insisted on remaining *It*. “You can’t be *It*. We’re *It*,” they shouted, whirling away to begin the chase all over again, while their remaining years at All Saints flew by, happier years for young Brandy, all because of Jack.

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As the months passed, Jack became known as Crackerjack, so amazingly fleet of foot, so good at dodging and darting, that no one in the class could keep up with him. This might have suggested to an onlooker that Jack, from the beginning, had been capable of more, much more, than he let on, and that Jack in fact had been faking all along.

Onward to their last day at All Saints School, they both were *It*. They ran and ran till their hearts throbbed in their throats. Then as sometimes happens in the lives of school friends no more than age fourteen, they found themselves on separate roads, and never met again.

One road led to a seminary for a youth who had seen that goal far enough ahead that he thought it okay to mention his secret to his tag team friend.

“Become a priest? I can’t imagine it. It’s pure magic,” said Jack, evidently musing. “How would that be?”

They were in the village park near its fire station, beneath its water tower, after school. The other boys had all run away. Jack faced him in sunlight, squinting, as if trying to imagine how it would be, something as mysterious as water in an old water tower never freezing in Minnesota’s sub-zero cold. He shook his head.

“If you ask me, I’d say you’re crazy. I could never do that.”

With those words, Jack wandered over a horizon and vanished for years, suddenly a stranger again, at least until a letter arrived when Brandy had been no more than a week at seminary.

Brandy’s mother had the most amazing news. Word had trickled back to his hometown that his old grade-school classmate had entered an East Coast seminary and was studying for the priesthood somewhere near Philadelphia, or maybe it was Boston. Little could be more surprising as far as Brandy’s mother was concerned, for as she put it, “I thought his family were just a pack of atheists.” She underlined *atheists*.

Brandy folded her letter, slid it back into its envelope, and gazed out a window of his seminary room overlooking

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a tree-lined quadrangle where one of his teachers in a cassock strolled in the late afternoon reading his breviary. He held the letter in hand no more than a minute, but it took him back eight years to the day Jack told him how crazy he was. An unseen hand seemed to have tagged the two of them.

*Now we're both crazy, Crackerjack*, said Brandy to himself.

After all, God played tag. They both were *It*, or so he thought.

From that day forward, the lives of two boys who had once played tag in a schoolyard took remarkably different directions, diverging ever more as years went by.

Their lives as priests could not have been less alike. Jack—known these days as the “Iron Cardinal”—traveled a Roman road whose destination was selection of the next pope. Brandy for no apparent reason was heading toward a funeral for a young man he never knew. Next week, Brandy would hire a new church janitor with the approval of a parish lay committee. Brandy obeyed Bishop Norman St. Clair, no questions asked. Bishop Norman obeyed Jack, no questions asked. Jack was sometimes pestered by photographers and insistent reporters who *did* ask questions, while Brandy fended off deerflies and wood ticks in making his parish rounds.

As Cardinal Cudahy, Jack authored books widely reviewed in the Catholic press. He was quoted in footnoted essays, was seen on television and heard on radio. He had acquired a hint of an Italian accent. Brandy appeared at parish picnics, and sometimes was seen in soup kitchens. Irish to the core, he nonetheless sounded like a singsong Minnesota Swede.

Had he once truly known the great Cardinal John Cudahy? He himself sometimes wondered if it had been no more than a crazy-quilted dream—as so many dreams can be—about an obscure parish priest in a humdrum northern outpost and a great Cardinal sweeping past Swiss Guards at ornamented porticos.

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Meanwhile, battered Iron Range communities wondered if Bob Dylan would bring tourists their way, doing for them what Elvis did for Memphis. Jack could seem as much an entertainer as the two of them. Anything could happen.



## Vincent Callixtus Vesuvio

Birds chirped as the rising sun flamed through a breach in dark gray clouds. Strips of ruddy sunlight flared between eighteen-wheeler trucks reflected here and there in glinting pools of rainwater. A long shadow shot across Brandy's path as he guided Fred through a wayside parking area. A blinding swatch of horizontal sunlight burst between two semis parked at the end of a row. The shadow bolted forward, and an instant later Father Vincent Vesuvio of St. Callixtus in Twin Rivers stepped from what might have been a gap in the universe.

Fred barked.

"It's only me, Fred, old boy," said Vesuvio in thundering voice, sufficient to rouse any truckers asleep nearby and not already awakened by his motorcycle.

A tall figure in black leather, Vesuvio was exactly as his name suggested. Brandy was among the few who knew that his middle name coincidentally was the same as his current church assignment. His imposing stature and fiery disposition called to mind volcanoes, worlds of molten lava and brimstone, scorching deserts, blazing seashores, and the Old Testament mountaintops of Isaiah. This impression was reinforced by his red hair and beard, sufficiently deep red that it might have been the bed of embers beneath flames.

There could not have been a parish priest more striking, a presence more heart-stopping with a voice full of portent, occasion, and what seemed to be its own echo. By his mere presence, he dominated every room he entered. Even out of sight somewhere, he seemed to take over by simply being nearby. To stumble upon him in the setting of dreary gatherings at diocesan meetings was sufficiently electrifying to

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bring the whole place to life, simultaneously turning an engaging bishop into a shrinking violet. In an era other than this one, he might have been the most intimidating of grand inquisitors, a Torquemada to make Torquemada tremble without so much as asking a single pointed question or pointing to a burning stake.

In a parking lot, with idling diesel behemoths all around, he seemed to be the largest thing. He altered vanishing points by stepping into a scene. In the redrawn perspective, he became its dominant entity, even without his leather jacket and boots and sitting astride the black Harley-Davidson motorcycle he drove in weather tamer hearts would have avoided.

Vesuvio's familiar voice boomed. "By the Lord, Aloy, if this doesn't beat all. You heading to my church. Me heading to yours. Priests passing in the night like ships. Is that it? And you even brought your hound along."

Fred growled.

"He doesn't like being hauled around in the middle of the night," said Brandy.

"None of us do," said Vesuvio. "Can't blame him either. I myself feel like growling. A complete mystery, what's going on here—you and I switching churches for a funeral on my end and another on yours, with almost eight-hundred miles of driving between the two of us, and neither of us likely to get home in time for the Saturday vigil. Bishop Norman brings two more off the bench for that. The whole diocese has been turned inside out and backward, and I for one would like to know why."

"I just heard that the pope has died." Brandy had spent enough time with his colleague to have discovered the value of sudden shifts. To be with Vincent Vesuvio long was to perch on the edge of a cauldron. A change of subject, even in the direction of a dead pope, could be a step back.

"I am sure that doesn't explain it, though on second thought perhaps it does. Our Iron Cardinal has one foot in Rome and another here, and Bishop Norman has career aspirations. He does not mind having an iron foot stepping on his toes." Vesuvio stroked his beard. "Well, not much

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surprise where the pope is concerned. He had been in failing health, and names of possible successors were already being bandied about. As for us, many more days like this, and we will soon be following our Holy Father. You can bet we won't have a crowd of cardinals gathering to send us on our way with talk of canonization soon after. Just a few shovels of dirt will suffice. Speaking of such, that funeral you are taking today will be quite an affair. I ought to be thankful to have gotten out of it, yet I am not. I feel as if I have been forced to shirk a responsibility."

Brandy glanced at his watch. "Mine should be routine, an old parishioner who had been in a nursing home for years and has outlived almost everybody who knew him. I left you a few background notes on a table in the sacristy just in case you wanted to include a few personal remarks."

"Kind of you, Aloy. I like to do that—but as long as we have run into each other, there are things you ought to know. We're both ahead of schedule. I didn't leave you any notes, and I should have. I imagine Bishop Norman himself doesn't know the whole story. It's been seeping out, and it's a disturbing one to walk into blindly. Give me five minutes."



## A Horror in Paradise

Those five minutes of a chance encounter on the road between North Port City and Twin Rivers stretched to almost fifteen in Brandy's car. Rain had begun again, more earnestly than ever, with large drops drumming overhead. Alongside, Vesuvio drummed on with equal insistence, ignoring both time and the weather. His breath fogged windows.

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March 2018, Victoria, Texas where this novel at last earned the words THE END.

## About the Author



**James Casper** was born and grew up in southern Minnesota. Apart from living in various Minnesota locales, he has resided in Boston, St. Louis, eastern Tennessee, and London, England where portions of this novel were written. He and his wife of twenty-four years have traveled extensively. Rome is one of their favorite places. He is happiest walking from lock to lock along the Thames in England.

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