

Tough Guys Don't Dance



Norman
Mailer



Random House
New York

unmanageable panic. I was like a man who is told he has a mortal illness, yet can cure it by jumping off a fifty-foot cliff into the water. "No," he says, "I'll stay in bed. I'd rather die." What is he protecting? What was I? Yet the panic carried everything before it. It was as if I had been told in my sleep that the worst malignancies of Hell-Town were gathered beneath my tree in the Truro woods. If I went back, would they enter me? Was that my logic?

Sitting beside the telephone with a panic as palpable as physical distress itself—my nostrils were colder than my feet, my lungs burned—I began the work, and it was equal to labor, of recomposing myself. How many mornings had I gone from a quarrel over breakfast into my small room on the top floor where I could look on the harbor and try to write, yet each morning I had learned how to separate out—and it was much like straining inedibles from a soup—all the wreckage of my life which might inhibit writing that day. So I had habits of concentration gained first in prison and gained again from learning to do my work each morning no matter how upsetting the fracas with my wife; I could keep my mind on a course. If the seas before me now pitched uncontrollably—well, I knew, if nothing else, that I must try at this point to think of my father and not ask any question that had no answer. "Do not attempt to recall what you cannot recall" was a rule I had long kept. Memory was equal to potency. To seek to remember what one could not bring back—no matter how urgent the need—was like calling for an erection when a girl was wide open before you, but your cock—that perverse cur!—was resolutely, obdurately, finally, refusing to stir. You had to give up. I would recall, or I would not recall what happened two nights ago—I would have to wait for that—but in the interim I had to build a wall around my panic. Every recollection of my father felt therefore like a good stone laid down properly.

So I went back to such thoughts, and knew the beginning of that peace which comes from contemplating the love, no matter how pinched, that one holds for a parent. Since I had poured myself a drink as the one legitimate sedative I could call upon this morning, and had gone to my *querencia*, that study on the third floor where I used to work looking out on the bay, so did I go back to the legend of Dougy "Big Mac" Madden and meditate on its great cost to him, and to my mother, and to me. Because for all his height and bulk we never had enough of him. A good deal of my father, I can tell you, was lost before he ever

met my mother. That much knowledge I had already gained in childhood listening to the talk of his old friends.

I remember that they used to come out to our house on Long Island to visit him for an afternoon before they all went over to his bar, and since they were longshoremen and former longshoremen like himself, and almost as large, my mother's modest living room would look, so soon as they all stood up, like an overloaded boat ready to capsize. How much I liked those occasions. I would already have heard, over and over, the story of my father's great hour.

Years later I was told by a lawyer that if separate accounts given by two witnesses agree in every detail, you are listening to a lie. In that case, my father's legend must have had a good deal of truth in it. All the versions varied. They could, however, agree this much: On a day back in the late thirties, at a time when the Italians were driving the Irish out of the leadership in the longshoremen's union, my father—one of the leaders in the ILA—was parking his car on a side street in Greenwich Village when a man darted out of a doorway and took six shots at him with a .45. (I also heard it was a .38.) How many struck him, I do not know. It is hard to believe, but most of the stories said six, and I could count four gunshot wounds on his torso when he showered.

He was renowned in those days for his strength. A strong man among longshoremen had to be a phenomenon, but he must have been as powerful as a Kodiak bear on this occasion because he looked at his assailant and took a step forward. The gunman (whose .45, I assume, was now empty) saw that his victim did not drop. So he began to run. I find it hard to believe, but my father chased him. For six blocks along Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village he ran after his assailant (some say eight blocks, some say five, some say four) but it took all of such a distance before Dougy recognized that he could not catch him and came to a stop. Only then did he see blood oozing from his shoes and realize that he was dizzy. He turned around just before the street began to turn around on him and saw that he was outside the emergency entrance of St. Vincent's Hospital. So he knew he was in bad shape. He hated doctors and he hated hospitals, but he was going in.

The attendant at the desk must have decided the new arrival was a drunk. A huge distraught man with a considerable amount of blood on his clothing was teetering over the table.

"Please sit down," said the orderly. "Wait your turn."

While my father normally did no more than nod or frown as friends told the story, here he would sometimes speak up himself. When I was a child, the look of absolute murderous certainty that came into his eyes was so thrilling to my keyed-up young interior that once or twice I wet my pants a drop. (Although before such manly company, I kept the secret to myself.)

My father, in telling it, would seize an imaginary orderly by the shirt, his arm extended stiffly, his fingers clutching the collar as if his strength might be all but expired, yet what remained was enough to throw this specimen of unfeeling humanity through a wall.

"Take care of me," Dougy Madden said in a low, deadly voice in my mother's living room. "I'm hurt."

He was. They kept him in St. Vincent's for three months. When he came out, his hair was white, and he was done with the union. I don't know whether lying in bed for so long a time took away a part of his massive nerve or whether the Irish leaders had lost. Maybe, by now, his mind was in another place, that far-off place, full of unspoken sorrow, where he lived for the rest of his life. In this sense, he retired before I was born. Maybe he was mourning no more than his lost eminence, for he was a labor leader no longer, merely a barrel of a man. In any event, he borrowed money from his relatives, opened a bar on the Sunrise Highway forty miles out on the South Shore, and for eighteen years was the proprietor of a place that did not prosper and did not fail.

Most bars, given this description, figure to be managed with economy, since they are usually empty. My father, however, had a bar that was like himself, large, full of generosity and only half managed, even if Big Mac did look like the bartender out of whom the mold was made.

He was there for eighteen years in his white apron and his prematurely white hair, his blue eyes measuring the drinkers when they got obstreperous, and his skin so red from the steady inflow of drink ("It's my only medicine," he would tell my mother) that he looked an angrier man than he was, fierce as a lobster making one last lunge out of the pot.

He got a fair daily crowd, a good Saturday crowd, albeit beer drinkers, and a heavy summer crowd, full of weekend lovers out on Long Island and fishermen going or coming. He would have been a prosperous man, but he drank a bit of the profits, gave back more across the bar, sent scuds of them across on free drinks to the farthest reaches of

the room, let people run up a tab so large they could have paid the funeral expenses of their fathers and mothers and uncles and aunts, and he loaned money at no interest and didn't always get it back, and gave it away, and gambled it away—so as the Irish say (or is it the Jews?), “It was a living.”

Everyone loved him but my mother. She came to love him less over the years. I used to wonder how they ever got married and finally decided she had to be a virgin when they met. I would suspect that their short and most loving affair (for long after they divorced, my mother's voice would still be tremulous when she spoke of their first weeks together) was stimulated not only by how different they were but because she was also a liberal and wished to defy the prejudices of her parents against the Irish, the working classes and the smell of beer in bars. So they married. She was a small, modest, pleasant-looking woman, a schoolteacher from a nice town in Connecticut, as delicate as he was large, and she had nice manners and was a lady to him. I think she always remained a lady to him, and while he would never admit that his own great secret prejudice was just for that, for the high elegant splendor of a lady's hand in a long glove, nonetheless, he adored her. He was terribly impressed that he had married such a woman. Alas, they remained a sad couple. To use his expression, neither could move the other a cunt-hair to the left. If not for my presence, they would soon have foundered in frustration and boredom. I was there, however, and their marriage lasted through my fifteenth year.

Maybe it would have gone all the way, but my mother made one error. She won a fundamental argument with my father and got him to move from our floor-through apartment above his bar, to a town called Atlantic Lanes, and that was a quiet catastrophe. The shift proved equal, doubtless, to the shock his grandfather took on leaving Ireland. The one major concession given my mother was the one he should never have agreed to. Dougy distrusted Atlantic Lanes on sight. Although it sounds, I know, like a bowling alley, the developers bestowed the name on their brand-new town because we were no more than two miles from the ocean, and our streets had been designed to show a few bends. (Lanes.) The shape of our twisting roads came from the draftsmen laying it out on drawing paper with French curves. Since the land was as flat as a parking lot, our S-turns served no purpose I could see except to make it easier not to have to look at your neighbor's ranch house

which was exactly like your own. It's a joke, but Dougy could not find his way back when drunk. It was no joke. Something was leached out of all of us who grew up there. I cannot name it, although in the eyes of my father, we kids were awfully civilized. We didn't hang out on a street corner—no right angles in Atlantic Lanes—we didn't run in gangs (we had best friends instead) and once when I was having a fist fight, my disputant said in the middle of it, "Okay, I quit." We stopped and shook hands. My mother was not displeased that (1) I won, since she had learned over the years that would make my father happy and (2) I had acted like a gentleman. I had shaken hands nicely. My father was intrigued. It was truly the suburbs. You could get into a fight and say "I quit," and the winner would not celebrate by banging your head on the pavement. "Boy, where I grew up," he told me (it happened to be Forty-eighth Street west of Tenth Avenue) "you never quit. You might just as well say 'I die!' "

Once, a few years before the end of their marriage, I overheard my mother and father in the living room on a rare night when he was home from the bar. I was trying not to listen, in fact was staying away by doing my homework in the kitchen. When, on these rare occasions, they would find themselves together, they could sit for hours without speaking, and their mutual gloom often got so intense that even the audio on the TV seemed to quaver. On this night, however, they may have been close, for I heard my mother say in a gentle voice, "Douglas, you never say that you love me."

That was true enough. For years I had hardly ever seen him give her a kiss and then only like a miser pulling out the one ducat he will spend this year. My poor mother. She was so affectionate she would kiss me all the time. (Out of his sight.) She never wanted him to think my habits were unmanly.

"Not once, Douglas," she now repeated, "do you ever say you love me."

He did not reply for a minute, but then he answered in an Irish street voice—it was his declaration of love—"I'm here, ain't I?"

Of course, he was famous among his friends for such an ascetic view. In longshoreman days, he had earned another legend for the number of women he could attract and the powerful number of times he could do it in a night. All the same, it was his manly pride that he was never obliged to kiss the girl. Who knows what ice room of the heart my

skinny Irish grandmother raised him in? He never kissed. Once, not long after I was kicked out of Exeter, I went drinking with Dougy and his oldest buddies, and he was meat for the roast on this matter of a kiss. His friends might be scarred and half toothless and in their fifties, and since I was twenty, they looked ancient to me, but, God, they were filthy-minded. When they talked, they rolled around in sex like it was stuck to their pants.

My father was, by then, not only divorced from my mother, but had, in the general waste that followed, lost his bar. He lived in a rented room, had a lady friend once in a while, worked in a barroom for wages and saw a lot of his old friends.

Every one of these old friends, I soon discovered, had a quirk, and the rule of the game was to kick your old buddy on the quirk. Some were tight with a dollar, some had foolish habits like betting long shots, one of them always threw up when he was drunk ("I have a sensitive stomach," he would complain. "Yeah, we have sensitive noses," they would reply) and my father always got it about kissing.

"Oh, Dougy," his old friend Dynamite Heffernon would say, "last night I was with a nineteen-year-old who had the juiciest, sweetest, plumpest, loveliest mouth you ever saw. Could she kiss! Oh, the moist breath of her fine smile. Do you have any idea of what you're missing?"

"Yeah, Dougy," another would cry out, "give it a try. Break down. Give the broad a kiss!"

My father would sit there. It was the game, and he would suffer it, but his thin lips showed no pleasure.

Francis Frelagh, a.k.a. Frankie Freeload, took his swipes at the ball. "I had one widow with a tongue last week," he told us. "She put that tongue in my ears, down my mout', she licked my t'roat. If I let her, she would have swiped my nostrils."

At the look of disgust on my father's face, they laughed like choir boys, high-pitched and shrill, Irish tenors kicking Dougy Madden's quirk.

He took it all. When they were done, he shook his head. He did not like to be performed on while I was there—that was the measure of his fallen state—so he said, "I think you're all full of shit. None of you has been laid in the last ten years." When they whooped at his anger, he stuck out his palm. "I'll give you," he said, "the benefit of the doubt. Let's say you know a couple of girls. And they like to kiss. Maybe they

even go down on you. All right. That's been known to happen. Only, ask yourself: The broad is taking care of you now, but whose joint did she cop last night? Where was her mouth then? Ask yourself that, you cocksuckers. Cause if she's able to kiss you, she can eat dog turds."

This speech put his old gang in heaven. "I wonder who's kissing her now," they would croon in Dougy's ear.

He never smiled. He knew he was right. It was his logic. I knew. I had grown up with it.

This was as much, however, as I could go on thinking about my father before the itch of my tattoo began to distract me out of measure. By a look at the clock, I saw it was nearly afternoon, and I stood up with the thought of taking a walk but had to sit down again beneath the sudden weight of fear that came upon me from no more than the thought of stepping outside.

Yet now I felt a whole decomposition of myself, a veritable descent from man to dog. I could no longer cower here. So I put on a jacket, and was through the house and into our damp November air with the jaunty sense that I had just performed a near-heroic act. Such are the warps of pure funk. It is a low comedy.

Once on the street, however, I began to comprehend my reason, at least, for the new fear. Before me, a mile away, was the Provincetown Monument, a pinnacle of stone over two hundred feet high, and not unlike the Tower of the Uffizi in Florence. It was the first sight of our town from the road or sea as one approached our harbor. It sat on a good hill back of the Town Wharf, indeed, so much in the middle of our existence that one saw it every day. There was no way not to. Nothing built by man was of such height until you got to Boston.

Of course, a native never needed to recognize it was there. I probably had not looked at it for a hundred days, but on this day, so soon as I turned to walk toward the center of town, my tattoo, like a meter to mark the pulsations of my anxiety, seemed to crawl over my skin. If normally I looked at our monument without seeing it, now I most certainly did. It was the same vertical tower that I had tried to climb on a drunken night almost twenty years ago, and I came so near to the summit as to reach the overhang of the parapet not thirty feet below. I had gone up the vertical, taking handholds and footholds where I found them in the granite blocks, enough at least for my fingertips and my toes. It was a climb to awaken me in the middle of many a night for

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wheels in the space allotted by the Park Service and walked off to sit on the top of a low dune, passing sand through my hands while I meditated on the Pilgrims and wondered if it might be out in the seas right here that they turned north to sail up the tip of the Cape and around to Provincetown. What better place than this promontory for Marconi to send his early wireless messages across the ocean's space? My mind, however, on pondering such large concepts, grew empty, and I sighed, and thought of other wireless messages that had gone between Joan of Arc and Gilles de Rais, Elizabeth and Essex, the Czarina and Rasputin, and in our own most reduced and modest way, Madeleine and myself. I sat at the top of this low bluff and passed sand back and forth in my hands and tried to estimate my situation now that I had seen Madeleine. Did it all come down to Alvin Luther Regency?

It occurred to me that I could just about use a rifle and had hardly any competence with my pistol. For that matter, I had not had a fist fight in five years. With drinking, and, of late, my smoking, I must have a liver large enough for two. Yet at the thought of facing Regency, I also felt some of the old blood come back. I did not start as a fighter, and I did not seem to have ended as one, but the years in the middle when I tended bar taught me a few tactics, which knowledge I had doubled in the slammer—I was a compendium of dirty tricks—and then finally, it didn't matter. I had gotten so evil in my last few street fights that they always had to pull me off. Something of my father's blood had passed on to me, and I seemed to have bought his code. Tough guys don't dance.

Tough guys don't dance. On that curious proposition my memory, like a boat coming around a buoy into harbor, returned to my adolescence and I could feel myself dwelling again in the year I turned sixteen and went into the Golden Gloves. That was far away from where I now found myself with Madeleine's note. Or was it not so far? After all, it was in the Golden Gloves that I tried for the first time to hurt someone seriously, and sitting here, on the beach at South Wellfleet, I started to smile. For I was able to see myself in the way I used to, and at sixteen, I always pictured myself as tough. I had, after all, the toughest father on the block. While I knew, even then, that I would never be his equal, still I told myself that I was enough like him to make my high school football varsity by my sophomore year. That was a feat! And I remember how that winter, once football was over, I used to feel a mean and proud

hostility toward the world which I could hardly control. (It was the year of my parents' divorce.) I started to go to a boxing gym near my father's bar. It was inevitable. Being Dougy Madden's son, I had to sign up for the Golden Gloves.

A Jewish boy I knew at Exeter told me that the year before he turned thirteen was the worst in his life. He spent it getting ready for his Bar Mitzvah, and never knew if on a given night he could fall asleep or would be wide awake reciting the speech he had to give next winter in the synagogue to two hundred friends of his family.

That wasn't as bad, I suggested to him, as your first night in the Gloves. "For one thing," I said, "you walk in half naked, and nobody has prepared you for that. Five hundred people are there. Some of them don't like you. They're for the other guy. They're very critical when they stare at you. Then you see your opponent. He looks like dynamite."

"What made you do it?" my friend asked.

I told him the truth. "I wanted to make my father happy."

For a boy with such a good purpose, I had, all the same, a nervous stomach in the dressing room. (I was sharing it with fifteen other fighters.) They, like me, were to be in the blue corner. On the other side of a partition was a dressing room with fifteen contenders from the red corner. Every ten minutes or so, one of us on each side would go out to the auditorium and another would come back. There is nothing like the danger of humiliation to build fast alliances. We didn't know each other, but we kept wishing each guy luck. Devoutly. Every ten minutes, as I say, one kid would go out, and soon after, the previous kid would return. He would be ecstatic if he won, and in misery if he lost, but at least it was over. One kid was carried in, and they sent for an ambulance. He had been knocked out by a black puncher with a big rep. In that minute I considered forfeiting my match. Only the thought of my father sitting in the first row kept me from speaking up. "Okay, Dad," I said to myself, "my death is for you."

Once the fight started, I discovered that boxing, like other cultures, takes years to acquire, and, immediately, I lost the little culture I had. I was so scared I never stopped throwing punches. My opponent, who was fat and black, was just as frightened and never stopped either. At the bell, neither of us could move. My heart felt ready to explode. By the second round, we could not do a thing. We stood still, we glowered, we used our heads to block punches because we were too tired to

duck—it cost less to get hit than to move. We must have looked like longshoremen too drunk to fight. Both of us were bleeding from the nose and I could smell his blood. I learned on this night that blood has a scent as intimate as body odor. It was an horrendous round. When I got to my corner, I felt equal to an overraced engine whose parts were ready to seize.

"You got to do better, or we don't win," said the trainer. He was a friend of my father's.

When I could catch my voice, I said as formally as I could—you would have thought I was already in prep school—"If you want to terminate the fight, I will abide by that."

The look in his eye, however, told me he would repeat my remark for the rest of his life.

"Kid, just go beat the shit out of him," my trainer said.

The bell rang. He gave me my mouthpiece and a shove toward the center of the ring.

Now I fought with desperation. I had to eat the entrails of my remark. My father was shouting so loudly, I even thought I was going to win. Boom! I ran into a bomb. The side of my head could just as well have stopped the full swing of a baseball bat. I suppose that I careened around the ring because I only saw the other boxer in jump cuts. I was in one place, then I was in the next place.

New adrenaline must have been shaken loose by the punch. My legs were shocked full of life. I began to circle and to jab. I ran and I ducked and I jabbed (which is what I should have done from the beginning). At last I could recognize the given: my opponent knew less about boxing than me! Just as I was measuring him for a hook (since I had now discovered that he lowered his right each time I feinted with my left to the belly) why, the bell rang. Fight was over. They lifted his hand.

Afterward, when the well-wishers were gone and I was sitting alone with my father in a coffee shop, a second wave of pain just commencing, Big Mac muttered, "You should have won."

"I thought I did. Everybody says I did."

"That's friends." He shook his head. "You lost it in the last round."

No, now that it was over and I had lost, I thought I had won. "Everybody said it was beautiful the way I took that punch and kept moving."

"Friends." He said it in so lugubrious a voice that you would have thought it was friends, not drink, that was the bane of the Irish.

I never felt more argumentative with my father. There is no surliness like sitting around, half dislodged in every vale of your mind, torso and limbs, your organs hot and full of lead, your heart loaded with consternation that maybe you did lose the fight your friends say was stolen from you. So I said out of my own puffed mouth, and I probably never sounded cockier to him, "My mistake was that I didn't dance. I should have come out fast at the bell and stuck him. I should have gone: Stick! Stick! Slide," I said, moving my hands, "and circled away. Then back with the jab, dance out of range, circle and dance, stick him! Stick him!" I nodded at this fine war plan. "When he was ready, I could have dropped the bum."

My father's face was without expression. "Do you remember Frank Costello?" he asked.

"Top of the mob," I said with admiration.

"One night Frank Costello was sitting in a night club with his blonde, a nice broad, and at the table he's also got Rocky Marciano, Tony Canzoneri and Two-ton Tony Galento. It's a guinea party," my father said. "The orchestra is playing. So Frank says to Galento, 'Hey, Two-ton, I want you to dance with Gloria.' That makes Galento nervous. Who wants to dance with the big man's girl? What if she likes him? 'Hey, Mr. Costello,' says Two-ton Tony, 'you know I'm no dancer.' 'Put down your beer,' says Frank, 'and get out there and move. You'll be very good.' So Two-ton Tony gets up and trots Gloria around the floor at arm's length, and when he comes back, Costello tells the same thing to Canzoneri, and he has to take Gloria out. Then it's Rocky's turn. Marciano believes he's big enough in his own right to call Costello by his first name, so he says, 'Mr. Frank, we heavyweights are not much on a ballroom floor.' 'Go do some footwork,' says Costello. While Rocky is out there, Gloria takes the occasion to whisper in his ear, 'Champ, do me a favor. See if you can get Uncle Frank to do a step with me.'

"Well, when the number is over, Rocky leads her back. He's feeling better and the others got their nerve up too. They start to rib the big man, very careful, you understand, just a little tasteful chaffing. 'Hey, Mr. Costello,' they say, 'Mr. C., come on, why don't you give your lady a dance?'

"'Will you,' Gloria asks, 'please!'

"'It's your turn, Mr. Frank,' they say.

"Costello," my father told me, "shakes his head. 'Tough guys,' he says, 'don't dance.'"

Now, my father had about five such remarks and he never dropped them on you until he did. "*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur*" became the last and the unhappiest, even as "Don't talk—you'll spill the wind out of the sails" was always the happiest, but through my adolescence, it used to be: "Tough guys don't dance."

At sixteen, a half-Mick from Long Island, I did not know about Zen masters and their koans, but if I had, I would have said the remark was a koan, since I didn't understand it, yet it stayed with me, and the older I became, the more meaning it offered, until now, sitting on a beach at South Wellfleet, looking out at the surf that came to me at the end of the three-thousand-mile ride of the waves, I thought again of the wonders of erosion that Patty Larcine had worked on my character. The wells of self-pity rose predictably, and I thought it was time to stop thinking of my koan unless I could bring a new thought to the circle.

Surely my father had meant something finer than that you held your ground when there was trouble, something finer that doubtless he could not or would not express, but it was there, his code. It could be no less than a vow. Did I miss some elusive principle on which his philosophy must crystallize?

It was then that I saw a man approaching on the beach. The closer he came, the nearer I came to recognizing him, and with that, many of my preoccupations with myself began to fade.

He was a tall man but not menacing in appearance. In truth, he was plump, and soon in danger of looking like a pear, for at any weight he would have had a potbelly and not much in the way of shoulders. Moreover, his gait as he walked on the sand was comic. He was well-dressed, in a three-piece pin-stripe charcoal-gray flannel suit with a white collar on a striped shirt, a club tie, a small red handkerchief in his breast pocket, and a camel's-hair coat folded on his arm. To avoid scuffing his brown loafers, he was carrying them in his hand, and so marching in argyle socks over the cold November sand. That gave him the prancing, skittery foot of a show horse stepping over wet cobblestones.

"How are you, Tim?" the man now said to me.

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Seven

I cannot say that either of us was cheered a good deal by how the other looked. My father was making instant coffee, but at his first sight of me, he put down the jar and whistled softly.

I nodded. I had come downstairs with a swollen foot, a left arm I could not raise above my head, and a bucket of ice water inside my chest. Who knows what circles were beneath my eyes.

Dougy was the greater shock, however. There was almost no hair left on his head and he had lost a lot of weight. High on his cheeks was a fierce pink flush that reminded me of a fire in a windswept place.

The recognition came like a touch of the crud itself. He must be on chemotherapy.

I guess he had become accustomed to the quick wipe from people's eyes of the initial aversion, for he said, "Yeah, I got it."

"Where's it situated?"

He made a gesture to indicate that was neither here nor there.

"Thanks for sending a telegram," I said.

"Kid, when there's nothing anybody can do about your story, keep it to yourself."

He looked weak, which is to say, he did not look all-powerful. I couldn't tell, however, if he was in discomfort.

"Are you on chemotherapy?" I asked.

"I quit it a couple of days ago. The nausea is a disgrace." He walked forward and gave me a little hug, not too close, as if he felt infectious.

"I heard a joke," he said. "This Jewish family is waiting in the hospital lobby. The doctor comes up to them. He's a prosperous son of a bitch with a peppy voice. He choips like a boid." My father liked on occasion to remind me, as he used to remind my mother, that the roots were back in Hell's Kitchen and be damned to you. His snobbery remained unflaggingly inverse, so he would go out of his way to say "boid" for "bird."

Now he could proceed with his joke. "'I have,' says the doctor, 'good news *and* bad news for you. The bad news is that your father's disease is incurable. The good news is that it is not cancer.' The family says, 'Thank God.'"

We laughed together. When we were done, he handed me his untouched cup of instant coffee and started to spoon himself out another. "Here we have bad news," he said.

"It's incurable?"

"Tim, who the fuck can say? Sometimes I think I know the moment I got it. If I'm that close to the source, maybe I can find my cure. I tell you, I hate those pills the doctors push. I hate myself for taking them."

"How do you sleep?"

"I never been a famous sleeper," he said. Then he nodded. "Kid, I can handle anything but the middle of the night." That was quite a speech for him. He cut it off. "What happened to you?" he asked.

I found myself telling him about the fight.

"Where'd you leave the dog?" he asked.

"Buried him in the yard."

"Before you went to sleep?"

"Yes."

"Somebody raised you right."

We stayed in the kitchen all morning. After I made some eggs, we tried the living room, but Patty's furniture was not for an old longshoreman. Soon we were back in the kitchen. Outside it was another gray day, and looking through the window, he shivered.

"What do you like about this godforsaken place?" he said. "It's like the back coast of Ireland in winter."

"No, I love it," I told him.

"Yeah?"

"The first time I came here was after being kicked out of Exeter. Remember we got drunk?"

"I sure do." It was a pleasure to see him smile.

"Well, in the morning you went back to New York, and I decided to come here for the summer. I'd heard of this town. I liked it right off, and then when I was here a week, I went to a dance joint out near the highway one night. There was a good-looking girl I kept watching, but I didn't go near her. She was with her crowd and dancing. I just kept observing. At closing, I took a shot at it. I went up to her on the dance floor, looked in her eyes, she looked in mine, and we went out the door together. Screw the dudes she was with. They didn't do a thing. So the girl and I crossed the road, went into the woods, lay down, and, Dougy, I was in her. I figure it took six minutes from the time I walked up to her till I was in. That impressed me more about myself than anything I'd done till that day."

He enjoyed my story a good deal. His hand reached out in an old reflex for his tumbler of bourbon and then he realized it wasn't there. "So this place is your luck," he said.

"To a degree."

"Are you all right?" he asked. "For a guy who's just beaten up a hood with a tire iron, you don't look too happy. Are you afraid he'll return?" What a look of happiness came into my father's eyes at the thought that Stoodie might decide to come back.

"There's a lot to talk about," I said, "but I don't know if I'm ready to tell you."

"Have to do with your wife?"

"Some."

"Say, if I was going to be around for another ten years, I wouldn't say a word, but since I won't, I'll tell you. I believe you married the wrong broad. It should have been Madeleine. She may be a vindictive guinea, but I liked her. She had class. She was subtle."

"Is this your blessing?"

"I kept my mouth shut on too many things for too many years. Maybe it started to rot inside. One of the causes of cancer, says the choiipy boids, is a harsh environment."

"What do you want to tell me?"

"A guy who marries a rich woman deserves every last thing he gets."

"I thought you liked Patty." They had loved to drink together.

"I liked her guts. If all the other rednecks was as macho as her, they'd be running the world. But I didn't like what she was doing to you."

Certain dames ought to wear a T-shirt that says: 'Hang around. I'll make a cocksucker out of you.' "

"Thanks."

"Hey, Tim—it's a figure of speech. Nothing personal."

"You were always worried about me, weren't you?"

"Well, your mother was delicate. She spoiled you a lot. Yeah," he said, looking at me out of his ice-blue eyes, "I worried about you."

"Maybe you didn't have to. I took my three years in the slammer without a fall. They called me Iron Jaw. I wouldn't take cock."

"Good for you. I always wondered."

"Hey, Dougy," I said, "what's the virtue? You think I feel like a man most of the time? I don't. What was I protecting? You're an old-line fanatic. You'd put all the faggots in concentration camps including your own son if he ever slipped. Just cause you were lucky enough to be born with tiger's balls."

"Let's have a drink. You're off your feed."

"Should you have a drink?"

He made a move with his hands again. "It's an occasion."

I got two glasses and put bourbon in them. He added a considerable amount of water to his. If nothing else, that was enough to tell me he was ill.

"You have me wrong," he said. "Do you think I've been living alone for twenty-five years in a furnished room, and I do no thinking? I try to keep up. In my day, if you were queer, you were damned. Don't even ask. You were an agent of hell. Now, they got Gay Liberation. I watch them. There's faggots everywhere."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

"Ha, ha," he said and pointed a finger at me. The early liquor was obviously doing angel's work on his spirits. "My son wins the round."

"Good at dancing," I said.

"I remember," he said. "Costello, right?"

"Right."

"I'm not sure I know what that means anymore," he said. "Six months ago they told me to stop drinking or I was dead. So I stopped. Now, when I go to sleep, the spirits come out of the woodwork and make a circle around my bed. Then they make me dance all night." He gave a cough filled with all the hollows of his lungs. It had been an attempt to laugh. "Tough guys don't dance," I tell them. "Hey, you

bigot,' the spirits answer, 'keep dancing.' " He looked into the lights of the bourbon as if their kin could be found there, and sighed. "My illness makes me less of a bigot," he said. "I think about faggots and you know what I believe? For half of them, it's brave. For the wimps, it takes more guts to be queer than not. For the wimps. Otherwise they marry some little mouse who's too timid to be a dyke and they both become psychologists and raise whiz kids to play electronic games. Turn queer, I say, if you're a wimp. Have a coming-out party. It's the others I condemn. The ones who ought to be men but couldn't show the moxie. You were supposed to be a man, Tim. You came from me. You had advantages."

"I never heard you talk so much before. Not once in my life."

"That's cause you and I are strangers."

"Well, you look like a stranger today," I said. It was true. His large head was no longer crowned by his rich white hair, white with the corrupt splendors of ivory and cream. Now he just had an enormous bald head. He looked more like a Prussian general than the model of an Irish bartender.

"I want to talk to you now," he said. "I may be acting thick, but it came over me at Frankie Freeload's funeral: Tim is all I got."

I was moved. Sometimes a couple of months would go by, sometimes a half-year, before one of us called. Still, it seemed all right. I had always hoped so. Now he confirmed it.

"Yes," he said, "I got up early this morning, borrowed the widow's car and told myself all the way here that this time we speak it out face to face. I don't want to die without you knowing of my regard for you."

I was embarrassed. Therefore, I leaped on the way he said "the widow's car." "Did you have any hanky-panky with Freeload's wife?" I asked.

Not often did I see my father look sheepish. "Not lately," he said.

"How could you? With a friend's wife!"

"For the last ten years, Frankie was pickled in booze. He couldn't find his tool or the pot."

"A friend's wife?" I gave him the family laugh. High tenor.

"It was only once or twice. She needed it. An act of mercy."

I laughed until the tears came. "I wonder who's kissing her now," I sang. It was wonderful to have your father at his own wake. Suddenly I felt like crying.

"You're right, kid," he said. "I hope and pray Frankie never knew." He looked at the wall for an instant. "You get older and you begin to feel as if something is wrong. You're in a box, and the sides keep coming closer. So you do things you didn't do before."

"How long have you known you were sick?"

"Ever since I went into St. Vincent's forty-five years ago."

"That's quite a while to have cancer and never show it."

"None of the doctors have a feel for the subject," he said. "The way I see the matter, it's a circuit of illness with two switches."

"What are you saying?"

"Two terrible things have to happen before the crud can get its start. The first cocks the trigger. The other fires it. I've been walking around with the trigger cocked for forty-five years."

"Because you couldn't recover from all those hits you took?"

"No. Cause I lost my balls."

"You? What are you talking about?"

"Tim, I stopped, and I felt the blood in my shoes, and there was St. Vincent's in front of me. I should have kept chasing the bastard who did the shooting. But I lost my nerve when I saw the hospital."

"Hell, you had already gone after him for six blocks."

"Not enough. I was built to be that good anyway. The test came when I stopped. I didn't have the nerve to go on and catch him. Cause I could have. Something in the scheme of things might have made him trip. I didn't push my luck. Instead, I stopped. Then I heard a voice clearly in my head. It's the only time I would say that God or someone *highly superior* was speaking to me. This voice said, 'You're out of gas, kid. It's your true test. Do it.' But I went into St. Vincent's and grabbed the orderly by the collar, and just at the moment when I got tough with that punk in the white jacket was when I felt the first switch get thrown in the cancer."

"What threw the second switch?"

"It never got thrown. It corroded. Cumulative effects. Forty-five years of living with no respect for myself."

"You're crazy."

He took a big belt of his watered bourbon. "I wish I was. Then I wouldn't have cancer. I've studied this, I tell you. There's buried statistics if you look for them. Schizophrenics in looney bins only get cancer half as often as the average population. I figure it this way: either your

body goes crazy, or your mind. Cancer is the cure for schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is the cure for cancer. Most people don't know how tough it is out there. I was brought up to know. I got no excuse."

I was silent. I stopped arguing with him. It is not easy to sort out what effect his words were having. Was I coming to understand for the first time why the warmth he had for me always seemed to cross a glacial field? I may once have been a seed in Douglas Madden's body but only after that body was no longer held by him in high esteem. I was, to a degree, defective. Agitation had to be stirring in all my old wounds, well-buried and long-resigned. No wonder my father had taken no great joy in me. Intimations came how in years ahead—if I lived—the memory of this conversation might make me shake with rage.

Yet, I also felt compassion for my father. Damnable compassion. He had cast a long shadow across my understanding of him.

Next, I knew a considerable amount of fear. For now it seemed real to me again that I had murdered two women. How many times over these last few years had I come to the edge of battering Patty Larcine with my bare hands? And each time I resisted the impulse, had not a sense of oncoming illness settled more firmly into me? Yes, like my father I had been living in a harsh environment. I thought once more of the impulse that led me to climb the tower. Had that been the night when I hoped to keep the first switch from being thrown?

I knew then that I would confide in Big Mac. I had to talk about the two murders and the plastic bags in the damp cellar of this house. I could hold it no longer. Yet I could not bring myself to speak about it directly. Instead, I more or less sidled up to the topic.

"How much do you believe," I asked, "in predestination?"

"Oh, yeah," he answered, "what kind of predestination?" The shift in subject made him happy. Long years behind a bar had left my father adept at living with questions as wide as the heavenly gates.

"The football spreads," I said. "Can God pick the team that will cover?"

It was obviously a question Dougy had lived with. He revealed that glint in his eye which showed that he was debating whether to disclose useful knowledge. Then he nodded. "I figure if God bet the spread, He'd win eighty percent of the time."

"How do you come up with that number?"

"Well, let's say the night before the game He passes over the places

where the players are sleeping and takes a reading. 'Pittsburgh is up for this game,' He says to Himself. 'The Jets are jangled.' Pittsburgh, He decides, is worth a lot more than three points. So He bets them. I'd say He's right four times out of five."

"But why four out of five?"

"Because footballs," said my father ominously, "take funny bounces. It is not practical to get better than four out of five. That's good enough. If He wanted to take account of the physics of every bounce, He'd have to do a million times more work in His calculations in order to get up from eighty to ninety-nine percent. That's not economical. He's got too many other things to work at."

"But why did *you* settle on four out of five?"

My father took this as a most serious question. "Sometimes," he told me, "a football handicapper can get a great streak going and hits up around seventy-five percent against the spread for a month or more. I figure that's because he's got a pipeline for a little while into higher places."

I thought of Harpo. "Can some keep it going longer?"

My father shrugged. "Dubious. These pipelines are hard to maintain." He showed no concern at mixing his metaphor: "It's a high-wire act."

"What about a terrible losing streak?"

"Those guys are on the pipeline too. Only the flow is in reverse. Their hunches are one hundred and eighty degrees wrong."

"Maybe it's just the law of averages."

"The law of averages," he said with disgust, "has done more to mess up people's minds than any idea I know. It's horse manure. The pipeline is either feeding you or it's tricking you. Greedy people get fucked by the pipeline."

"What if your bets turn out fifty-fifty?"

"Then you're nowhere near the pipeline. You're a computer. Look in the papers. The computer predictions end up at .500."

"All right," I said, "that's prediction. What I really want to talk about is coincidence."

He looked troubled. I got up and freshened our drinks. "Put a lot of water in mine," he said.

"Coincidence," I said. "What do you make of it?"

"I've been doing the talking," he said. "You tell me."

"Well," I said, "I think it's not unlike the pipeline. Only it's a network. I believe we receive traces of everyone's thoughts. We're not aware of it usually, but we do."

"Wait a minute. You're saying people are able to send and receive wireless messages? Telepathy? Without knowing it?"

"Whatever you want to call it."

"Well," he said, "for the sake of argument, why not?"

"Once," I said, "I was up in Fairbanks, Alaska, and you could feel it. There was a network."

"Yes," he said, "near magnetic north. What were you doing in Fairbanks?"

"A scam. Nothing significant." Actually, I had gone up on a cocaine run after Madeleine and I had split. It was in the month before I got busted on a quick trip to Florida for the same deed. Selling two kilos of cocaine. Only the services of a lawyer well paid for his powers of plea bargaining got it down to three years (with parole).

"I had a ruckus one night with a guy in Fairbanks," I told him. "He was bad news. In the morning when I woke up, I saw his face in my thoughts. His expression was ugly. Then the phone rang. It was the same fellow. His voice sounded as ugly as his face. He wanted a meet with me late that afternoon. All day I kept running into people I had seen the night before, and not once was I surprised by their expression. They looked angry or happy in just the way I expected them to look. It was as precise as a dream. At the end of the day I met with the heavy. But now I was no longer uptight about it. Because, as the afternoon went on, I could see him clearly in my thoughts and he was looking wasted. Sure enough, when I met up with him, that's how he was, a bigger coward than me."

My father chuckled.

"I tell you, Dougy," I said, "I think everybody in Alaska drinks so they can shut themselves out from living in everybody else's head."

He nodded. "Northern climes. Ireland. Scandinavia. Russia. Drunk like skunks." He shrugged. "I still don't see what this has to do with your argument."

"I'm saying people don't want to live in each other's heads. It's too scary. It's too animal. Coincidence is the sign that they're approaching such a state."

"What kicks it off?" Dougy asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. I took a breath. Everything considered, there were worse matters to contend with than my father's scorn. "I think that when something big and unexpected is about to happen, people come out of their daily static. Their thoughts start pulling toward one another. It's as if an impending event creates a vacuum, and we start to go toward it. Startling coincidences pile up at a crazy rate. It's like a natural phenomenon."

I could almost feel him brooding over his own past. Had he lived through experiences to compare with this on the morning he was shot? "What kind of impending events do you mean?" he asked.

"Evil events."

He was being cautious. "What kind of evil events?"

"Murder, for one."

He pondered what I said. Then he shook his head as if to say, "I do not like your input." He looked at me. "Tim," he said, "do you remember the bartender's guide?"

In my turn, I nodded. When I started my first job as a bartender, he had given me a schedule. "Son," he had said, "keep this in mind. In New York, on the streets, it's Peeping Toms from twelve A.M. to one A.M., fires from one to two, stickups two to three, bar fights three to four, suicides four to five, and auto accidents from five A.M. to six A.M." I had kept it in my head like a typed schedule. It had proved useful.

"Nothing special about murders," he now said.

"I'm not talking about New York," I said, "but here."

"You're saying a murder in this place is an extraordinary event?" I could see him all but measuring the cold damp of Cape Cod air against the blood and steam of the act. "Yeah," he said, "all right, I'll grant the point." He looked not altogether happy. "What's the purpose of this discussion?"

"I'm tangled up in coincidences," I said.

"Well, by your line of reasoning, you must be close to something bad," he said.

"I'm closer than that."

He took the pause.

"There was a suicide last week," I said, "although the man may have been killed. I believe I stole his woman the night it happened." The most curious thought came to me next: because my father had cancer, whatever I told him would never touch the air for others. That might

be one of the virtues of his cancer. He could receive messages like a tomb and never send them out again. Was my father now on the other side of the spirits from all of us?

"There's more to tell than that," I said. "It's not public knowledge as yet, but two women have been killed in this town in the last week."

"My Lord," he said. That was a lot of news, even for him. "Who did it?"

"I don't know. I have a few ideas, but I'm not certain."

"Have you seen the victims? Are you sure of your facts?"

I hated to reply. As long as I said no more, we might still cling to the premise that we were drinking in the kitchen: we could surround his visit with lulling recollections of other boozy meanderings through the uncharted spaces of philosophy. But by my next remark, we would both be brought up dripping, sober, and on another beach.

I suppose I took so long to reply that my father repeated the question. "Have you seen the victims?"

"Yes," I said. "They're in the cellar."

"Oh, criminey!" His tumbler was empty. I saw his hand go for the bourbon bottle and then withdraw. Instead, he turned his glass upside down. "Tim, you do it?" he asked.

"No." I couldn't refuse my own liquor. I swallowed what was left in my glass. "I don't think I did," I said, "but I can't be certain."

So we got into it. Bit by bit, detail by detail, I told him more and more of what I could remember of each of these days after the night I went to The Widow's Walk, and when I soon confessed (for confession is indeed how it felt) that Patty Lareine was one of the two women dead, my father gave one groan of the sort you might utter if you fell from a window to be impaled on a spike.

Yet I cannot say he looked terrible. The fierce pink flush, which had been restricted to his cheekbones and left the rest of his face pale compared to his once red color, now spread a flush to Dougy's forehead and chin. That provided the illusion he was less ill than before. Indeed, I think he was. No matter his antipathy to cops, he looked so much like one himself—Captain of the Precinct or Lieutenant of Detectives would have been seized on instantly by any casting director—that willy-nilly he found himself playing the role for a good part of his life. I have to say on the strength of his questions, he was no mean interrogator.

Finally I came to a halt in my account (although in the telling we

passed from morning to afternoon, made a few sandwiches and drank a little beer). He said at last, "There are two questions that keep me from seeing straight on this. One is whether you are innocent or guilty. I find it hard to believe the first, but then, you're my son." He stopped and scowled, and said, "I mean, I find it hard to believe the second—that you're guilty."

"What you're saying," I told him, "is that I could have done it. You said it! The reason is: *You* are capable of murder. In fact, maybe you did pull off one or two in the union days."

Dougy gave no reply to that. Instead he said, "Good people kill for duty, or for honor. Not for money. A sleazo kills for money. A coked-up greed bag slays for money. But not you. Do you stand to benefit from her will?"

"I have no idea."

"If her will leaves you real money, you're in a load of trouble."

"She may have had no money left. She was always secretive about how much was there. I suspect Patty Lareine made some terrible investments in the last couple of years. We could be broke."

"I sure hope so," he said. Then he laid his frozen blue eyes on me. "The problem is in the manner of those killings. That's my second question. Why? Why would someone decapitate those two women? If you did it, then you and me, Tim, have to pack it in, I figure. Our seed has got to be too hideous to continue."

"You speak calmly about such matters."

"That's because I don't believe you're capable of such an atrocity. I mention it only as an option. Set the record straight."

His monumental sense of always knowing the right thing to do irritated me in the most peculiar fashion. It was as if we were not speaking of ultimate matters so much as having a family spat. Ideological divergences. Kill the son of a bitch, says Dougy Madden. No, says the son, put him in a home for the mentally ill. I wanted to shake my father.

"I am capable of such atrocities," I said to him. "I can tell you. I know that. I'm prey to the spirits. If I did do it, I was in some kind of coma. I would have been carried to it by the spirits."

Big Mac gave me a look full of distaste. "Half the killers in this world make that claim. Fuck 'em all, I say. What does it matter if they're telling the truth? They're just a lightning rod for all the shit that other people are putting on the air. So they're too dangerous to have around." He

shook his head. "You want to know my real feelings? I'm hoping and praying you didn't do it because, in fact, I couldn't off you. I couldn't even turn you in."

"You're playing with me. First it's one option, then the other."

"You damn fool," he said, "I'm trying to find my own head."

"Have a drink," I said and spilled a little more bourbon down my throat.

"Yes," he said, ignoring me, "the second big question takes care of the first. Why would anyone perform a decapitation? All you do is avoid a maximum prison in order to get a maximum mental hospital. You can even bring capital punishment on yourself by the hideousness of the crime—at least if they hang you in this state. So you'd have to be nuts. I don't believe you are."

"Thank you," I said, "but I don't believe the killer is nuts either."

"Why would anybody sane cut off the head?" he repeated. "There's only one good reason. To entrap you." Now he beamed like a physicist who has found his hypothesis. "Is the burrow in your marijuana patch large enough to hold an entire body?"

"Not unless the footlocker is removed."

"Could it hold two bodies?"

"Never."

"The decapitation may have been reasoned-out. There are people capable of anything once they decide it gives them a practical advantage."

"You're saying . . ."

But he was not about to relinquish the fruits of his thinking process to me. "Yeah, I'm saying those heads were cut off so they'd fit your burrow. Somebody wants you to take the fall."

"It's got to be one of two people," I said.

"Probably," he said, "but I can think of a few others." Now he tapped the table with his middle fingers. "Were the women shot in the head?" he asked. "Can you see from the heads how they were killed?"

"No," I said. "I didn't study them."

"What about their necks?"

"I couldn't look at that."

"So you don't know if the beheading was done by a hacksaw, a knife, or whatever."

"No."

"Don't you think you ought to find out?"

"I can't disturb them any more."

"Tim, it's got to be established. For our own sakes."

I felt ten years old and ready to blubber. "Dad," I said, "I can't look at them. It's my wife, for God's sakes."

He took that in. The heat of the chase had made him oblivious to much.

"Okay," he said at last, "I'll go down and take a look."

While he was gone I went to the bathroom and threw up. I wish I could have wept instead. Now that I was alone and no longer had the fear of breaking down in front of my father, there were no tears. Instead, I took a shower, put my clothes back on, splashed my face with after-shave lotion and went back to the kitchen. He was there and looking pale. All of the flush was gone. His cuffs were damp and I realized he must have washed up at the cellar sink.

"The one who's not your wife . . ." he began.

"Jessica," I said. "Oakwode. Laurel Oakwode."

"Yeah," he said, "that one. She was decapitated with a sword. Or maybe it was a machete. One big stroke. Patty is a different business. Somebody who didn't know how to do it sawed her head off with a knife."

"Are you certain?"

"Want to look for yourself?"

"No."

I saw it anyway. I do not know whether it was in my imagination or a true glimpse of his retina, but I saw Jessica's throat. There was a straight slash across, and the nearest flesh was bruised by the weight of the blow.

Patty's neck I did not have to visualize. I would not forget a red jungle.

My father opened his hand. The fragment of a spent bullet was in it. "That's from Oakwode," he said. "I can't get the rest without making a mess in your cellar but I've seen stuff like this before. It comes from a .22 with a hollow tip. That's what I'd say. It spreads on contact. In the brain, one .22 can do all the work. Probably with a silencer."

"Fired into her mouth?"

"Yes," he said. "Her lips look bruised, like somebody forced her to open her mouth. Maybe with the gun muzzle. You can still see the

powder burns on her upper palate where the entrance hole is. Small enough. Just right for a .22. No exit wound. I was able to fish this much out." He pointed to the bullet fragment.

Tough guys don't dance. You had better believe it. *Fish this much out.* My knees were quivering and I had to put both hands on the glass to get the bourbon to my lips. I found that I was not ready to ask about Patty.

He told me all the same. "There are no marks, entrance wounds or bruises on her face and scalp. I would assume she was shot in the heart and died quick."

"What makes you think that?"

"Just a guess. I don't know. It could have been a knife. Her head tells me nothing but who she is." He frowned as if forgetting a most important detail. "No—it tells me one more thing. You would need a coroner to be sure, but I would guess that your wife,"—now he could not say Patty Lareine either—"was killed twenty-four to forty-eight hours later than the other woman."

"Well, we'll find out," I said.

"No," he said, "we will never know."

"Why?" I asked.

"Tim," he said, "we have to dispose of these heads." He held up his hand to forestall me. "I know the price," he said.

"We'll never be able to find out who did it," I blurted.

"We'll determine that, I think. We just won't be able to prove it." The flush was coming back to his face. "If you want satisfaction, we'll have to look for other means."

I let that pass for now.

"Follow my reasoning," he said. "I figure there's more than one executioner. People who use machetes don't fuck with knives."

"People who use machetes don't usually have .22s with special bullets and silencers."

"I have to think about that," he said.

We were silent. I was doing very little thinking myself. A numbness was settling through my limbs as if I had been walking for many hours through the November woods and had just stopped to rest.

"Here's what I am clear on," he said. "Somebody chose to use your marijuana stash to hide Jessica's head. That implicates you so deeply you still can't say you didn't do it. Then the head is removed. Why?" He

held up both fists as if he were steering a car. "Because somebody has decided to kill Patty. This person wants to be certain both heads will be found there later. He doesn't want you or the first killer going back to destroy the evidence. Or suppose you panic. You might reveal it to the authorities. Therefore, this second person, he takes the head."

"Or she," I said, "takes the head."

"Or she," said my father, "although I don't know what you mean by that." When I said nothing further—I had spoken out of impulse—he said, "Yes, I figure two principals. The one who killed Jessica, and the one about to kill Patty. The first puts the head there to implicate you. The second removes it so that both can be put back later. At which time, or soon after, you will have to take the onus for both crimes."

"You're assuming an awful lot," I said.

"When people do these things," my father said, "they believe they are viewing the scene clearly even if all they're doing is dropping one more ingredient into the soup."

"Who's the cook?" I asked.

"Wardley, for one. He could have known Patty was dead all the while he was talking to you. He could have done it, and been setting you up."

"I don't see how."

"He has a low opinion of you. I don't blame him. Maybe he heard Jessica's head was now floating around, and he supposed you knew where it was. So he decided to ask, instead, for Patty's head. He figured you'd try to pass Jessica off as Patty. Then he'd have what he wanted—both heads."

"Can you stop repeating that word?"

"Heads?"

"It's getting to me."

"There's no substitute for it."

"Just use their names."

"Until we find their bodies, it's misleading."

"Just use their names," I repeated.

"Hey," he said. "You're as fancy as your mother."

"I don't care if my great-grandparents cut peat in Irish bogs every stinking day of their lives, I'm, yes, I'm as fancy as my mother."

"Ho, ho," he said, "score one for her side. May she rest in peace." He belched. The bourbon, the beer and his illness were working on him together. "Pass the bottle," he said.