

PART ONE: THE DUCK

It was our second night in Mary's Place, and things were going pretty good. The fire was crackling in the hearth. The Fount of All Blessings, our state-of-the-art coffee maker, was working well, making magic out of all natural ingredients. The booze flowed. More viscously, puns flowed.

Me, I had trouble in mind. But I had it so far down below the surface that not even my best friends caught me at it. We all had a problem, a big problem, and I was the only one who knew it. Since there was no solution to the problem, why bring everybody down?

And at least my bar was a pleasant place to be worried in. Good company in good spirits will get you through a lot. Fast Eddie at his piano was in rare form.

Jonathan Crawford wasn't there that night: he had a hot lead to chase, and would be too busy to drink for a while. Paradoxically, perhaps, now that we had proved to him that he might not be responsible for the existence of AIDS after all, he was more determined than ever to help stamp it out. There were about a dozen more people present than the previous evening—Ben and Barbara, Stan and Joyce, Tina and Victor, Jim and Joan, Herb, a few others—but except for our first newcomer, the Lucky Duck, all of them qualified as Immediate Family. That is, people who had been present in Mike Callahan's saloon the night it was converted to a rapidly expanding plasma. Folks in a position to tell you, from personal knowledge, what a nuclear firestorm is like up close.

People had been telling the Duck Callahan's Place stories all night—and either he believed every one of them, or the furry little bastard was damned if he'd give us the satisfaction of seeing how much he admired our skill as liars. I wondered which was true. From everything we'd learned about him the night before, extraordinary occurrences were utterly commonplace to him—but his pan was *so* dead, even beneath all that beard, that you had to wonder if it was costing him effort to keep it that way. Folks began to try to blow his mind, to come up with a true story that would exceed his credulity limit. Then at one point—just as Long-Drink McGonnigle had finished telling him about Dink Fogerty, who for a short time could make a dart board *want darts*, the Duck suddenly counterattacked.

"You find that unusual?" he said. "Strike you as bizarre, does it?" His tone was negligent, but his voice was loud enough to draw eyes. (Odd, that voice of his. You couldn't call it beautiful, exactly, with that honking quality to it, but it was certainly commanding, almost mesmerizing, when he wanted it to be.) "You citizens think you know about weird, is that right? Watch this, turkeys!" He slid from his chair, strolled with lazy grace through the crowd to the television set, punched it on, and returned to the bar.

Those of us who could not see the screen (most of us) were oddly wary of changing that status; as one, we looked to Fast Eddie, who could see the screen from his piano bench, for a report.

"Program crawl," he announced, puzzled.

We understood what he meant. We just didn't understand what *it* meant. All cable TV companies reserve one channel for an endlessly scrolling list of which programs are scheduled on what channels for the next hour and a half, in half-hour blocks. So what? Eddie squinted at the programs listed, found nothing to report for a few seconds ... and then suddenly his eyes grew very wide and round.

"*HO-ly ... shit*," he said hoarsely, and checked his watch, and looked at the screen some more, and rubbed at his eyes with his hands, and so on until Long-Drink lost patience and snapped, "What the hell *is* it, Ed?"

"It's now," Eddie croaked. He looked appealingly at Long-Drink. "*Right* now. I mean, *now* just started ... now."

Rooba rooba rooba, said the crowd.

We all understood Eddie perfectly. The program scrawl typically lists ninety minutes' worth of programming on forty-some channels, in half-hour increments—and an Iron Law of the Universe states that if you access the program scrawl 1,000 times at random, 871 times it will have just *finished* the present half-hour period, forcing you to wait the maximum possible amount of time for the information you seek. An additional 127 times, you'll be trying to find out what's going to start in the *next* half-hour

slot, so *that* block will have just finished. The only thing more certain is that if you give up and spin the dial to *see* what's on, every single channel will be showing commercials. Everybody knows this, and for some reason nobody ever talks about it. (You don't want to tug too hard at an anomaly like that: your universe could unravel like a cheap sock.) You can set your watch by it; you can watch your set by it; it never fails—unless you're attempting to demonstrate the phenomenon to an unbeliever.

Until now. Either Eddie was lying, or the Duck had—right before our very eyes—accessed the program scrawl just as it began to display the current listings. The most consistent example of Finagle's Law in the universe lay in ruins.

"Jesus Christ and His Tympani Five," the Drink exclaimed.
And then things got *weirder*, real fast.

First, fire—

Wanting to dramatically express his astonishment, Long-Drink attempted a histrionic gesture: he clapped his hand to his bosom, like a silent-movie heroine, while rolling his eyes at the sky. (Being Irish, he already frequently rolled his r's.) His right palm chanced to reach his chest first. There it encountered a lump in his shirt pocket: the little plastic film can of strike-anywhere matches he likes to light on his thumbnail, and all too often on his fly. The container happened to be full to capacity. A split-second after his right palm struck it, his left palm slapped against his right hand. Perhaps some unlikely harmonic resonance occurred. The entire canister of matches went up, with more than enough force to blow off the lid and send a fiery column of flaring matchsticks high into the air, like munchkin fireworks. Well it was for the Drink that he had tilted his head back—the rising barrage missed his chin and sailed high in the air, spreading like a fountain of flame. Only *one* of the forty-odd burning matches fell back onto his head and set his hair on fire.

Which made it unanimous. There were forty-odd people in the room, kind of clustered near the bar, and not one of us had our hair set on fire by any more—or any less—than a single match. It looked for a second as if two matches were going to land on Tommy Janssen, but he made a wild attempt to bat them away and managed to knock one of them high over the TV set so Fast Eddie wouldn't be left out. The room began to fill with the smell of burning hair. And the sound of forty-odd reluctant Apostles, beginning to speak in tongues ...

Then, water—

Well, beer. Luckily we are all experienced drinkers: those who held stronger beverages had presence of mind enough not to use them. But the alcohol content of beer is low enough to permit its use as an emergency fire extinguisher. Lucky us! —there was precisely enough beer on the loose to just wet down every single head. Tom Hauptman and I got each other. Since Fast Eddie had a straight Bushmill's in his hand, three or four helpful souls sent their dregs his way; all four missed and soaked the TV, which sparked and died. Eddie, meanwhile, solved his own problem: it was not his hair but his cabby's cap that was burning; he tore it off and trampled it in the sawdust.

Then, ice—

—as we all turned as one, with beer trickling down our necks, to glare at the Duck.

He smiled. "Hell," he said contentedly, "you probably think *that* was weird."

Those holding drinks stronger than beer now reached a consensus that their time, too, had come. The Duck's range and bearing were taken; arms cocked—

Suddenly the Duck was on his feet, eyes flashing. "Would you guys like to *see* something *really* weird?"

Consensus changed; there were much more practical things to do with hard liquor. "Don't see why." "Not me." "No, thanks Duckster, maybe later, eh?" "Well, it was a hot night anyway." "I love a good beer shower."

And folks sort of went back about their business.

The Duck turned to me, indicated his empty glass and held up one finger. I drew him another Rickard's, and waved my hand over it to indicate that it was on the house. He nodded thanks, once. "To

competition," he said softly, and tossed the empty glass negligently over his shoulder. "Maybe I can't outpun the big sawbones over there," he said, nodding toward Doc Webster, "but I can out-*weird* all of you rummies put together, any day that ends in y."

There was a distant "Ouch!" and then a small musical crash as the empty glass finally arrived, by circuitous means no doubt, in the fireplace.

"Mind if I ask a snoopy question or two?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Ask. If you stumble into any sensitive areas, I'll rip your eyelids off to clue you."

"You been this way from in front, Duck?"

His answer told me that he had caught the obscure Lord Buckley reference. "Why—you gonna straighten my bent frame?"

I shook my head. "Wouldn't know how. I just figured if it came on any time *after* you were born, where and when would be a clue."

"Astute. Naturally, such a thing would never have occurred to *me*. But as it happens, I have been the Lucky Duck ever since birth. Mom always said my father was the same way."

"You never knew your dad?"

"I tried, but his steadfast absence defeated me. That and Mom's reticence. About all I know about him is that he had red hair, his first name was Eric, and he must have been a tough guy—she never called him anything but Feared Eric, and she doesn't like to talk about him." He belched spectacularly. "I'm just guessing the red hair because she's Irish—for all I know he was a Apache. Or a Martian."

I made a long arm and punched myself up a Blessing from the Fount. The thirty seconds or so necessary for the beans to be microwave-roasted, ground, and brewed gave me time to think. Difficult to try and help such a thorny little guy. Did he even want any help? My Irish coffee was ready; I took the mug from the conveyor belt as it emerged from the Fount. How would Mike Callahan have handled this?

Well, kindly, above all.

"Gotta be a strain on a guy," I said tentatively, taking that glorious first sip.

He shrugged.

"Suppose I *could* straighten that metaphorical bent frame," I said. "Hypothetically ... would you want me to?"

"Make me a normal human being? Would *you* want to be one?"

"I'm serious."

"Doubtless many would agree with you," he said acidly, and then relented. "Oh, all right. I admit it's a good question. But how would I know? I have nothing to compare my life to." He shook his head. "I don't know, sometimes I think life would be a lot simpler if odds *didn't* get even odder around me. The only thing I can say for it—and against it—is that the luck is never totally good or totally bad. Just weird. Sometimes I think I've got a guardian idiot."

I cracked up. "You too? I've had that feeling all my life. I never heard anybody else call it that. A guardian idiot: a little invisible spirit just behind my shoulder, looking out for me ... only he's an imbecile."

The Duck nodded. "But a lucky imbecile. Somehow the net effect is usually that things more or less cancel out. Like, if you're sitting next to me and you win a million bucks in the lottery, don't worry about it: something will happen and you'll be right back where you started before you know it. Except for any wear and tear it might put on your nerves to win a million dollars and lose it in the same day."

It must have been hard for him to keep a friend. No wonder he was so sour. He always lived in interesting times.

"No," the hairy little man said, "taking it all in all, I don't think I'd want to *lose* my ... whatever it is I've got. I mean, obviously my life is perfect: it produced *me*. But like I said last night, if I ever meet that Mike Callahan of yours, I'd sure like to ask him whether or not there's some way to put an off-switch on the bastard. Or even just a rheostat. That's why I plan to hang out here awhile. As I age, I weary of being fantastic *all* the time. Just about the only thing I've never tried is boredom. People seem to work so hard to get it, I figure it must be worth trying."

"I enjoy having you in my place, Ernie," I said, thankful that I remembered at least half of the birth-name he'd given us last night. "I got a feeling you belong here. And we could sure use you: luck is

what this place needs in spades. But in all honesty, I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for Mike to show up."

He grimaced. "Christ, that's a break. I was bracing myself to do mouth-to-mouth on you if you tried it. Look, you just opened this joint. I'll give it a week or two; maybe this Callahan will show up. If not—" He shrugged. "There are worse places to have a beer." He finished his glass, and tossed it negligently over his shoulder. Behind him musical pandemonium broke out, thuds and crashes and cries of dismay, and people lurching back and forth. I don't think I could tell you any more about it if I'd seen it happen. All I know is, as the commotion was ending, the Duck stuck out both his hands, and his empty glass—two-thirds full now—dropped into them from above like a mortar round. He caught it well: some beer escaped, but it impacted squarely on the bar-rag that lay curled up before me.

He took a sip. "Half Dos Equis and half Cooper's," he announced.

Behind him there was brief silence ... and then sustained applause. "Damndest thing I ever—" "—and I tried to ... just as you—" "—have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my—" "—and then it just—" "—goddamn work of *art!*"

The Duck turned around and acknowledged their applause with an inclination of the head.

"See what I mean?" he said to me. "Some places that'll get you assaulted. These guys appreciate beauty. A round for the house, barkeep."

The applause redoubled.

I helped Tom Hauptman pass out fresh drinks until he had it under control, then went back to the Duck again.

"Anything in particular seem to trigger it?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Sometimes when I'm nervous. Out of sorts, like."

"Threatened? A defense mechanism?"

"Maybe." He didn't seem crazy about the implication. The true macho man doesn't *need* defense mechanisms.

No wonder he'd concentrated so hard on developing his *offense* mechanisms.

I decided the thing to do with the Lucky Duck was to simply accept him as he was and not worry about it. That was what Mike Callahan would have done. "Will you excuse me for a minute, Duck? I just remembered something I meant to ask the gang last night, and forgot. It's kind of important."

"What, end this riveting discussion? I'll have to kill myself."

Fast Eddie was just hem-stitching the final chorus of "In The Evenin' When The Sun Goes Down," to enthusiastic applause. I came around the bar and went to the chalk line. I took my mug with me, and whistled for attention. I had a question for this particular subset of humanity, one that could not be asked with strangers present. So I had to bring it up now. Sooner or later, strangers would be walking in the door and it would be too late.

"Ladies and gents," I said, "It's time to define our mandate."

"Mandate?" the Drink said. "What's mandatory around here, except having fun and makin' toasts?"

"Precisely my question," I said.

"How do you mean that, Jake?" Doc Webster asked. "You feel a need to make some new rules?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I just want a clear statement of what it is we're all here for."

"*Drinking,*" Long-Drink said, as one explaining the obvious to a child.

"Being merry," Eddie said in the same manner as Long-Drink.

"Sharing," Maureen said.

"Those are good things to do," I agreed, "and if that's what we all say we're here for, well, we could do a lot worse. But everyone in this room—except you, Duck—was within earshot the night I first proposed opening this joint and agreed to run it. Anybody here remember why? Anybody recall what we *said* it was gonna be for, that night?"

Light was dawning all around.

"*We were one that night.* I know a lot of time has passed since—I don't know about you, but I remember it real good. For a few minutes there we were one, in telepathic communion, and not for the

first time, either. So when it was over we hurt. That's why everybody hurts—because they're not telepathic. And it's a lot worse when you know what you're missing. So we all decided that if we could do it twice with the help of Callahan and the McDonald brothers, maybe in twenty years or so of trying we could learn to do it for ourselves. We *knew* the potential was there. And we agreed it was worth trying. This place was going to be a kind of casual workshop, a seminar in getting telepathic." Thoughtful silence.

"We've all kind of drifted apart some in the last year or two," I said. "Nobody's fault; none of us had a home big enough to hold all of us, that's all. Now we do. Have we drifted so far away from that night in the woods that we no longer want to try and get telepathic again? Are we content at this point to simply drink and be merry and share? Me, I'll go either way; whatever we decide. Take your time."

Long thoughtful silence.

"Do you have any specific 'ideas on how to go about getting telepathic, Jake?" Tom Hauptman asked.

"Just the plan I suggested that night," I said. "Love each other as hard as we can, and see what happens. And in the meantime, drink and be merry and share, to pass the time. Stick with what's worked for us in the past, in other words. I haven't got any Six-Step Program; I don't want to turn the place into a séance or an encounter session. I just want to know if it's all going somewhere ... or if it's all right here."

The Duck was so interested he forgot to look bored. He signaled Tom Hauptman for a new drink.

"I remember that night," Long-Drink McGonnigle said softly.

"I've never forgotten that night," Isham Latimer murmured, and hugged his wife Tanya to his side.

"I'll remember zat night in my grafe," Ralph von Wau Wau said.

"Like you said that night, Jake," Noah said, "maybe it'll take us twenty years to figure out how to do that again, but I got twenty years I'm not using." A couple of people nodded.

"Being all together like that," Doc Webster rumbled, "being *whole* for once.. .." He shook his big head. "Let me put it this way: I found a nuclear explosion at arm's length to be a less interesting experience. No: I found *surviving* a nuclear explosion at arm's length less interesting. I don't know about the rest of you monkeys, but ... no, that's the point: I *do* know about the rest of you monkeys. That's what we're all here for, all right."

And he spun on his heel, as gracefully *as* someone who weighed less than four hundred pounds, bellowed, "*To us!*" and fired the first shot of what became a thundering cannonade of glasses and coffee mugs into the fireplace. The cheer was as loud as the explosion.

I emptied my own mug quickly. I was smiling as I lobbed it. Not one of my clientele had needed to be told that this once, for this toast, I didn't mind them throwing mugs as well as glasses—that it was more important that every one of us be in on the toast. Maybe the task we had set ourselves *would* take us twenty years, but we had already made a start.

Then I thought of something. Sure enough, there was one customer in the whole house who still had a drink in his hand.

"Hey Duck," I called, just loudly enough to be heard over the general celebration. At once it dropped several decibels.

The Duck fixed an insouciant eye on me. "Yah."

"You in?"

He looked slowly around the room, meeting pair after pair of eyes. Then he looked down into his drink—a shot glass of Cherry Heering: who else would order such a thing after drinking beer?—for a minute, and returned that direct, piercing gaze of his to me. "Let me get back to you," he said.

I nodded. I knew the little flash of irritation I felt was unreasonable—but I felt it nonetheless. "No hurry."

He caught me at it. "I know. How could anyone turn down an offer to get married to several dozen people he'd only met the night before? The ungrateful rat."

I started to protest that I wasn't annoyed at all—and swallowed the words. Why would anyone want to get telepathic with a liar? "You're right," I said. "It was stupid to ask, if I wasn't prepared to hear an honest answer. I think we're a pretty special bunch of human beings—but I've known us for years, been

through a lot with us."

"And since you *know* how terrific you all are," he said, "you have no doubt in your mind that before long either I will realize that, or I'm so much of a jerk you wouldn't want me around anyway. So we have no problem."

I had to grin. "Nope. I guess we don't."

"The heck we don't," Tom Hauptman said in genuine alarm from farther down the bar. "We're out of beer."

Rooba rooba rooba. Consternation and astonishment competed for dominance. I went with denial. "Bullshit," I cried, and turned to look.

Tom was holding down all six draft taps. Not a drop was flowing. "Tap city," he said hollowly.

I forgave him; he was under stress. "How is that *possible*—?" I began, and cut myself off when I heard my voice come out sounding like a Pekingese in a snit. I tried again. "There is no way in hell this many people could have drunk six barrels dry in a night and a half. Not even *these* people." This time my voice was better, more like a beagle in a snit.

Could that thief of a distributor have sold me kegs that weren't full? No, I'd hauled them in the door myself, and my lower back was certain they'd been full then. A leak that massive would have left the place smelling like a brewery. "Well, there's only one sensible thing to do," I said. "Have a drink. Reverend, fix me a cup of Geb, will you?—and double up on the Black Bush."

"Sure thing, Jake," Tom said. He went to the Fount, and shortly handed me a mug of Geb Keyserlingck's magic coffee from Daintree, Oz. I took a deep gulp, and nearly choked. "Jesus, Tom, you forgot the whiskey!"

"The hell you say," the ex-minister said, shocked enough to use profanity. Our eyes met. "Oh my golly-gosh," he said slowly.

He unlocked the front panel of the Fount of All Blessings and swung it open. Sure enough, the Bushmill's bottle inside was empty. As we stared, the little red pilot light on the panel that warned of that very condition lighted for the first time. I looked to the row of replacement bottles beside the machine, and was only slightly startled to find them empty as well. So was every bottle on the shelf above the cash register.

I glanced around. Not *every* glass and container in the room was empty.

Just the ones with alcohol in them.

Rooba rooba ROOBA ROOBA—

"AARGH!" the Duck exclaimed, and yanked both hands away from his shot glass. It hung in midair, like Wile E. Coyote ten feet past the edge of the cliff, for long enough that I could see the tumbler was bone-dry, somehow emptied *while he'd held it in his hands*; then it fell, hit his foot, skittered across the floor at high speed, rolled up Merry Moore's leg and under her skirt, and committed a mischief upon her. She made the same sound the Duck had, in a higher octave, and ... expelled the glass, somehow. It bounced high off the floor, once, and as it descended the Duck tugged his waistbands an inch or two away from his belly with an air of weary resignation. *Thop*. The shot-glass landed squarely in his basket. He flinched slightly, and let go of his various pants. *Snap*. "Should have known better," he said sourly. "My own fault."

Silence, as glutinous as old peanut butter...

"There's a few more cases of juice outside in the van," Tom Hauptman suggested.

"If it's still there," I said, "it's going to stay there until I figure out what happened to the last load. Booze costs money; I can't go pissing it away." Nobody reacted to the lame joke. "Duck, could all this be something to do with you?"

"Possible," he admitted, "but I can't figure out the mechanism. Something on the quantum level, perhaps. Maybe there's some uncertainty in the probabilities of how fast alcohol evaporates ... no, it would have happened before now. I think. You'd better hope it *is* me: if it is, your hooch will probably be back shortly. But somehow I don't think so. This doesn't *feel like* me."

"What then?" Long-Drink said. "A plague of wino flies?"

"Whoever the son of a mother is," Doc Webster growled, "he's certainly struck right at the heart of this place. Or the liver, anyway."

"I was just about to quench my thirst," Eddie said darkly. "I been blowin' my ass off tonight."

"No booze, and all of a sudden I don't feel very goddamn merry," Tommy Janssen snarled. "All that leaves is sharing and trying to read the mind of the bastard that thought this up."

Trying to defuse the tension a little, Long-Drink McGonnigle put on his heavy Irish brogue. "If I get my hands on the spalpeen, the Dullahan will call at his door this night," he said.

"Mike's gone," Fast Eddie said.

"Not Callahan, Eddie: the Dullahan," the Drink said patiently. "Spelled D-u-b-h-l-a-c-h-a-n—'Dullahan' Gaelic for 'dark sullen person'—but it doesn't mean you, it refers to the grim, headless lad who drives the Costa Bower, the Death Coach. It arrives at midnight as an omen that someone in the house will die shortly. I'm surprised at you, you've been hanging out in an Irish bar for years; you'd think by now you'd have learned a little something about *Jesus Christ!*"

Long-Drink and I stared at each other, thunderstruck. We had figured it out at the same instant.

"Well," Eddie said diffidently, "I *do* know a little somet'in' about *Him*. . . ."

I waved at him absently, too busy to explain. My nostrils flared, and I saw Drink's do likewise. The solution to the mystery of the disappearing booze was right over our noses. And it was bad news.

Long-Drink and I exchanged a meaningful glance. The very survival of Mary's Place was at stake. The Drink looked as worried as I felt. And at any moment someone else might twig, and blurt it out. If that happened, just about all the hopes I had left in my life were lost, maybe for good. I thought so hard I felt my scalp get warm.

Bingo! I had one effective on my tag roster who might just have the right combination of special talents. It was ironic that just about all those special talents would probably have struck most people as liabilities—right now, they were worth gold. Maybe literally. . . .

Tanya Latimer is visually challenged—or as she puts it, blind. (She says euphemisms are for the differently brained.) So I could safely assume both a better-than-average sense of smell, and experience in working without visual cues. Furthermore, she is an ex-cop, which is how she got blinded, which is another story, except that it wasn't her fault. So I could be reasonably sure that she would be both fairly handy in a crunch—at least a close-in kind of crunch—and fairly quick on the uptake. Also, she is black. That might prove to be of some help here, too.

The trick was to find a way to cue her. Fortunately, my late Uncle Al was a Gold Shield for NYPD.

"Sister Tee," I said, quietly, "hear me good, and chill. Ten-thirteen."

She rummaged casually in her purse for Kleenex with both hands, took some out with her left hand. "Tell it," she said softly.

"Don't name it, but you know the thing they do rocks and ice and boo and the legal in?"

"Yah." Honk! She took a deep breath through her nose, the way you do after you blow your nose, to check results. Most natural thing in the world.

"The legal at twelve o'clock ... *he's wrong*."

"I hear that." She balled up the Kleenex and fumbled for another with the hand that was still inside the purse. "What's my play?"

"Got your jewelry, by any chance?"

"I hadda go through Long Island to get here, didn't I?"

"Don't miss," I told her.

She smiled lazily. "When?"

I hummed the chorus of an old Charles Brown side, "I'll Tell You When."

She nodded, still smiling. Most of the gang were staring at us in puzzlement—but bless 'em, nobody demanded an explanation. Tanya's husband, Isham, who was getting maybe one word in three, understood that smile, at least, and began to be visibly alarmed. His wife's smile told him as plain as print that she planned to do something drastic to someone, soon, and he wasn't 100 percent sure that it wasn't him. He'd have paled if he'd been equipped for it.

Which meant there was no time to lose.

"Hey, *Naggeneen*," I hollered, "your father was a Firbolg, and your mother was a fairy!"

A screech of rage came from the rafters above our heads. "*It's a damnable libel!* The man was an honest respectable cluricaune, just like meself!"

We all stared upward. Everyone but Long-Drink and Tanya and I was startled to see a withered little old man, three feet tall, perched in the crotch of a rafter. He wore a green coat with forked tails, a tall green cap in a state of sublime disrepair, a leather apron, pale green stockings, and glossy black high-heel shoes with silver buckles, nearly all of this obscured by a great cascade of snowy white beard which made his angry cheeks seem even redder. He was smoking a pipe like a white check-mark, and at the moment the bowl was glowing nearly as brightly as his bloodshot eyes. But redder than coat or cheeks or eyes or pipe-bowl, or all of them put together, was his lordly nose. He was toweringly drunk, shaking his fist at me with such force that he was near to toppling from his perch.

"Come on up beside me and say that, ya scut, if you're man enough!" he thundered. "Ya whey-faced ridiculous git of a nearsighted merrow and some kind of perverted eel, I'll use yer elongated spine for a homemade accordion! I'll put yez to bed with a mattock, I will! Well, what's it to be?" Four or five seconds of extremely total silence ensued. I used them trying to think of the best way to set things up for Tanya.

But it was Long-Drink who solved the problem. Actually, the solution suggested itself. The Drink and I both knew exactly what the reaction of the rest of the gang at Mary's Place to this apparition was going to be; we could both predict almost word for word what someone was going to say, any second now. So Long-Drink said it first.

"Oh, is *that* all it is? A leprechaun?"

The little old gent let out a shriek of inarticulate rage, thrust his pipe between his teeth, and leaped tipsily from his perch, aiming for Long-Drink's head.

Halfway there, in midair, with every eye on him, he disappeared—

—and Long-Drink began doing an imitation of the villain in the last act of an Invisible Man movie, snapping his head from side to side and fanning air

"*Now*, Tanya," I said.

PART TWO: THE CLURICAUNE

But she was already in motion. Tanya's not awful fast, but she's got a whole lot of quick. She had her jewelry—two bracelets of a ferrous nature, joined by a small but sturdy chain—already in her left hand; as her right closed and held on empty air a foot from Long-Drink, she fumbled briefly and closed one of the cuffs around a column of equally empty air, only inches from the Drink's throat. She shifted her grip to that air, let go with her right hand, and grabbed some more air, on the other side of Long-Drink's neck. With a grunt of effort, she bent it away from him and around in an arc, into the embrace of the second cuff. "*Cushlamachree*," the little old man's voice roared. Both cuffs promptly plunged toward the floor as if heavily weighted—and then rose skyward like a rocket, spraying sparks and smoke, lifting Tanya a few inches off the ground for a moment. She hung on like a summer cold, dangling from the apex of a V made of handcuff chain, her heels off the floor, a rain of Gaelic curses showering on her head.

As I yelled, "Get her!" Isham was moving. A little large for a heavyweight, he was short on quick but long on fast; he reached his wife in moments and added his weight to hers, while trying to climb up her and get a grip between her hands. Doc Webster arrived just then, freeing Ish to go up for the jumpshot. Between them they managed to wrestle the astonishingly lively pair of handcuffs back to about chest level—whereupon the little old bearded fellow reappeared within the iron bracelets, finished the obscenity he was in the middle of, and spat on the floor.

"Goddamn," Ish said, wiping his eye and looking the little man up and down, "he's so ugly his nails ain't got cuticles, honey."

She nodded. "Somehow I sensed it," she said.

The cluricaune snarled. "*Blind* as a bat, in the bargain, bedad! Jazus, yer lucky: ya don't know yer ugly, ya corpulent sow."

His anger had the massive dignity and rolling majesty that only the magnificently drunk can achieve. His voice was a little like the Duck's: you couldn't call it pretty, exactly, but it held your attention somehow. Somehow he kept that long-stem pipe clenched in his teeth as he talked, without losing any enunciation at all. From behind the bar, I could smell his breath. It smelled like every drop of alcohol I had thought I owned, earlier in the evening. The wonder was his pipe didn't set it alight.

"Damn, little fella," Isham said, too bemused to be angry at the slurs on his beloved, "who'd you *come* here with?"

"Nobody, yet," the munchkin menace snapped, "and bedad, by the looks of your wife here, it's sure to be some little while if it's left up to me! Bondage, is it, with the handcuffs and all? Small wonder you carry these plague-take-it things on your person, ya batface—that must be what got you a husband at all! Sure, for you to be callin' *me* ugly is just like the pot tellin' kettles they're Afro-American. Cease and unhand me, ya chocolate moose, or I'll raise up a spell that'll give yez the root canal every Thanksgiving from now till you give up an' cut yer own throat!"

Then all at once, with the mercurial changeability of the magnificently smashed, he forgot he was angry at her. "You know," he said conversationally, "it's a long time indeed I been wonderin' why your own folk ever gave up so gorgeous a name as The Colored—I don't understand it, be dipped if I do. Now what in the name of old Ca Chullain's cummerbund ever possessed yez to call yerselves Black—when yer *not*, and the word stands for everythin' scary and evil there is? I traveled the world in me youth, and I noticed yez mocha, mahogany, chestnut and cocoa ... ochre and umber and amber and gold.. .." His eyes were literally twinkling, as if someone had focused a baby spot on them. ". . . Coffee with cream, coffee with milk, coffee with nothin' but Tullamore Dew ... amber and anatase, russet and chocolate ... both the siennas, the burnt and the raw, hazel and sepia, several more ... an' never a black man or woman I saw. Most perishin' colorful people on Earth, and 'black' is the word for the *absence* of color! Go cobble a new pair o' shoes from the hide of the darkest of darkies in Africa: see if they'll let yez be wearin' them shoes to a wake—by old Balor's bumbershoot, what made yez claim yez a name ya can't wear, even on the *outside*? The Black Irish, now: *there's* a people that's *black*, have yez got any insights to share on the matter?" Whereupon he belched with shattering force, crossed his twinkling eyes, winked the one that was now facing Tanya ... then slowly winked the other as well, and passed out.

The silence was refreshing.

He remained in midair, on his back, breathing noisily. His elongated white pipe had slipped at last from his teeth, hovered below him, about a foot from the floor.

"Tanya, Ish, Doc," I barked, "hang on for dear life—he could be faking." The sense of relief was overwhelming.

"Voice on him like a model airplane," Doc Webster said, shaking his big head. "And yet somehow it'd be kinda pleasant to listen to—if there wasn't so much of it. So that's a leprechaun, huh, Jake? I forget what the deal is now: we're supposed to not take our eyes off him?"

"Don't be silly, Doc," Noah Gonzalez said. "It's the cuffs that'll hold him, if anything will."

"Is it true he knows where to find some Acapulco Gold?" Tommy Janssen asked excitedly. "The famous pot at the end of the rainbow?"

"Aw, rot at the end of the painbow—that's an old wives' tale," Shorty Steinitz said.

"What's wrong with old wives?" Maureen Hooker asked dangerously.

"Sorry, troops," I said hoarsely. I tried to clear my throat, but I didn't seem to have my E-meter. *Get thee behind me, Thetan!* "He's *not* a leprechaun. It's much worse than that. He's a *cluricaune*. Leprechauns make shoes."

Brief silence.

"What do cluricaunes do?" Doc Webster asked.

"Drink."

He paled. "Oh, shit."

"Hip-deep," I agreed.

"A cluricaune," Long-Drink said darkly, "is a walking thirst."

"A walkin' toist?" Fast Eddie exclaimed. "Cripes, Jake—"

"Take a good look, folks: that's the finish of Mary's place, right there in handcuffs," I told them all. "Unlike many of the Little Folk, a cluricaune will attach himself to a specific *place*, rather than to a family or clan. And what he *does* to that place is to drink it dry—no matter what God or man may do to stop him. A cluricaune can suck booze through a stone jug. He can smell sauce in a cesspool."

The cluricaune began to snore—loudly.

An extrapolation suddenly occurred to me. "In fact, I am the only bartender in the world prepared to bet cash that not one of his customers needs to pee."

Rooba rooba rooba—

"I thought I knew every con there was," Willard Hooker said, "but a cluricaune is a new one on me."

"What the hell is he doing in America?" Mary Kay asked.

"It's a good question," I conceded. "I've heard of a few of the old Daoine Sidh leaving Ireland—but mostly pookas, and once in a long while a Fir Darrig. It makes *least* sense for a cluricaune. Say you loved coffee more than life itself: would you move away from the foot of the Blue Mountains? It's highly improb—" I broke off and looked at the Duck.

"What's a Deeny Shee?" Eddie asked.

The Duck seemed to me horrorstruck by my obvious suspicion. Too late, I regretted having let it become obvious. "The Daoine Sidh are the fairy folk, Eddie," I said, "descendants of the Tuatha De Danaan, the Tribe of the Goddess Diana. Originally from Greece, by way of Scandinavia, took over Ireland from the Firbolgs back about the time clothes were being invented. They got their own butts kicked by the Miledhians about twenty-five hundred years ago.

The survivors talked it over and decided they couldn't live as a conquered people. So they went underground, at a place called Brugh na Boinne in County Meath, and over time evolved into the Daoine Sidh: the fairies and pookas and Fir Darrigs and leprechauns—yes, and the cluricaunes too."

The cluricaune's snore backfired twice, sharply, and then settled into the rhythm again—at a higher volume.

Doc Webster cleared his throat in counterpoint. "Look, Jake, in this company, I have had personal experience of many strange things. But I understood that the Daoine Sidh were *mythical*. Like ghosts, and channeled entities, and commercial kiddy porn. Not *real*."

"You mean 'real,' like time machines, and faster-than-light travel, and people that rain won't fall on, Doc?"

"Unt talkink dogs?" Ralph von Wau Wau added.

The Doc didn't answer.

"Will it make you feel any better about it to call what he does 'PSI,' Doc? Like the way Fogerty could make the dart board want darts? Like what the Duck does? The cluricaune is here. Our booze is not. Ergo, a sub-race of dwarves with paranormal powers must exist. You want to call it telekinesis, I won't stop you. Once you define 'magic' as 'knowledge I don't have yet,' you can stop being afraid of it."

"Well," the Doc said reluctantly, "when I'm holding it in my own hands, I can't very well deny it exists. But I must say this is aggravating. I was looking forward to getting *less* open-minded as I aged." He frowned. "All right: the Daoine Sidh are real. Just don't you say a goddamn word to me about Loch Ness!"

"My grandfather used to tell me stories about them," Long-Drink said. "Is that how you know about that stuff, Jake?"

"No, Drink—my people came over a century and a half ago. But awhile back I reached the age where a man starts to wonder about his roots."

"How'd ya know da guy's name wuz Noggin Ian?" Eddie asked.

The cluricaune opened one eye. "Me name is unknown to you yet, gallinaceous repugnant orangutang," he muttered. "Aye, 'Naggeneen' is what folks call a cluricaune, just a generical term for the breed: freely translated, it means 'a short beer.' Have ye z got any here?"

"Not since you showed up, bock-sucker," Eddie said bitterly.

The cluricaune went back to sleep. Noisily. His stupendous white beard floated above his torso,

curling up slightly at the end.

"He'll never tell anyone his real name, Eddie," I said. "In magical terms, it'd be kind of like giving somebody your credit cards."

"Jesus, Jake," Doc Webster said, "skip the family history and nomenclature, will you? This is serious—what do we do about this joker? How do you decluricaune a bar?"

The bad news first. "The only thing you can usually do to get rid of a cluricaune is go on the wagon, and stay there so long that he gives up and goes looking for a better 'ole."

"How long does dat take?" Eddie asked.

"I've heard of up to fifty years," I said.

"*Fifty years?*" Margie Shorter groaned. "What's the *low* end?"

"I've heard of as little as a year," I said.

Rooba rooba—

"I don't tink I can wait dat long," the little piano man said, frowning deeply. "I gotta toist myself "

"You said 'the only thing you can *usually* do ...'" the Doc said.

Now the good news. I smiled for the first time in what seemed like a long while. "Well, they say that once in a hundred years or so, and mind you, only if you happen to have a pure heart, an eye that sees no evil, a fleet foot, the grip of a lobsterman, and—" I glanced at the Duck "—the luck of the Devil himself ... you *might* just be lucky enough to *capture* the cluricaune, in iron. Then you're in Fat City. It now appears that between us, we made the nut."

"So where's the trigger?" Noah asked. "Now that we have him located, secured and accessed, how do we disarm him?"

Noah used to be a bomb-disposal expert for the county heat, until there was a spot of unpleasantness over his taking a terrorist nuclear weapon he was working on home for personal use, and not bringing it back. Since no citizens or legal aliens had perished as a result (just a single alien, without papers ... and a very nice tavern), no charges had been preferred—but he'd been transferred out of the Bomb Squad for good. He missed it fiercely, and still tended to think in those terms.

"Hear that, gang?" I said. "Noah has exactly the right mindset. Think of it like we're looking at a live, ticking—no, snoring bomb. Everything is going to be perfectly all right—*as long as we don't make any mistakes.*" I grinned. "The *good* news is, the snoring bomb is made of solid gold. If we handle this right, we can literally have just about Anything In The World We Want. I don't want to jinx it, but if we don't blow this, I think we truly may just have come to the End Of The Painbow—"

"I just wish—" Fast Eddie began.

"SSSHHHH!" Long-Drink and I said at once.

He looked offended. "I was just gonna say I w—"

"*Shut up, Eddie!*" we both bellowed, fear making us sound enraged. Fast Eddie blinked, opened his mouth to speak a third time ... saw us draw breath to shriek at him, and subsided. "Jeezis Christ," he muttered, shaking his head. "Nice manners, you mugs."

Close call. "That's exactly what I was just getting to," I said quickly. "Once you capture a cluricaune, you get three wishes."

ROOBA ROOBA ROOBA!

"The first three wishes spoken aloud...."

"Aw Jeez," Eddie said. He thought for a minute. "Sorry, Jake."

I sighed. "That's OK, Eddie. My fault, for trying to save the good news for last. Would everybody here please be *real* careful not to use the W-word at all for the next little while—just to be on the safe side?"

Nods all around. Doc Webster looked highly dubious ... but kept quiet. (What are the limits on paranormal powers? How do you know?)

"I think it's time we gave this some careful thought," I said, and my voice trailed off. Within seconds, the gang's expressions mirrored my own rapidly evolving succession of emotions.

We were beginning to see how horrible our dilemma really was....

MY PERSONAL FIRST-BALLOT

SHORTLIST:

(in no particular order, as they occurred to me, beginning with number two)

World peace?

An end to hunger?

A solution for pollution?

The end of tyranny?

A cup of coffee that tastes as good as it smells?

Universal freedom?

A resurgence of urban folk music?

A truce between the sexes?

(I could not wish for Love, much as I wanted one in my life: what good is a love gained through magic trickery? But the passing thought suggested:)

An off-switch for the pain system?

A good high without addiction or backlash?

A cure for AIDS?

A cure for suffering, period?

A cure for death?

Oh, dear God: a retroactive cure for death?

Barb! Jess!

Mom!

* * *

Was there any chance at all of distilling that down to three wishes? Was there anything on that list you could forgive yourself for leaving out? Might you not also be tempted to give at least a little thought to wealth and fame—and a hundred other things? I felt like a mule surrounded by 360 separate piles of hay—each one concealing a bundle of sweating dynamite.

And there was still the very *first* wish I'd thought of. The one I had rejected so instantly I was almost able to convince myself I'd never wished to wish it. A simple, painless, giftwrapped solution to the personal dilemma I'd been worrying about back at the beginning of the night, the one which had been haunting my dreams and churning my guts into brown butter for the past several months now. It was a small thing, next to world peace—but what isn't? I wanted to solve it myself, without assistance—but I wasn't sure I could, and I needed it solved so badly I was tempted beyond words to accept this free pass.

Looking around me, I could see that just about all of them had some similar personal demon of their own, someone it hurt unbearably to have lost, something they needed to live. And we all knew the arithmetic: several dozen into three doesn't go.

Honest to God, I think the dilemma would have destroyed a lesser group than us.

Had I loved those people an ounce less, I think I'd have said *screw 'em* and wished my dead ladies back to life before I could have a chance to think about it too much. Had any one of my customers loved me and each other an ounce less, they'd have tried to beat me to it.

I could spot ghastly boobytraps in every single one of those wishes that occurred to me in' that first rush of thought—and there were bound to be mines I *couldn't* spot. Indeed, in every single story I'd ever heard, in every fantasy from every culture and clime, "wish" was a synonym for "booby-trap." That was the *point* of wish stories.

What good is world peace, if it comes at the cost of liberty? The simplest way to end hunger and

pollution both is to exterminate the human race. Lose *too* much tyranny, and you lose order. I might not be able to bring myself to pour booze into coffee that tasted as good as it smelled. Universal freedom denies my right to restrict Jeffrey Dahmer's recreational and dietary habits. If acoustic guitar ever came back, I'd be masochistically tempted to turn the bar over to Tom and go back on the road.

A truce between the sexes? *Are you out of your goddamn mind, Jake?* What else *is* there to distract us all from onrushing death? Television?

An off-switch for the pain system? Suppose you neglected to switch it back on? Have you ever been stupid enough to disable the little routine on a Macintosh that asks, "Are you *sure* you want to delete this file?" before letting you trash applications?

There *is* a good high without addiction or backlash, and with several medicinal benefits to boot. The only one the government's brain-damaged "War On Drugs" has been even moderately successful in suppressing. (Its fatal flaw is, it smells nice.) Create another, they'd make that a crime too.

A cure for AIDS? Dr. Jonathan Crawford could have said a few things about that one. He'd been trying to cure malaria ... and might just have *caused* AIDS as a side effect. He was now working on a cure for AIDS. But he was being very very very careful.

Death is reputedly a totally effective specific for suffering. And if living people did not suffer, would they be people?

A cure for death without the sudden universal wisdom and restraint to control birth would be a recipe for horror unimaginable. For that matter, so would a cure for death without a concurrent cure for aging. As Larry Niven said, old age is not for sissies.

I am not the man I was the day my wife and daughter died in that wreck—or the man I was the day my mother died in that hospital. If I could bring them back, uncorrupted and untraumatized, just as I remembered them ... would they love this me? Would they know me at all? If they did, could my own heart take the stress of an emotional 180° like that?

Multiply my dilemma by—no, *raise it to the power of*—the number of people present with me in the room.

Now do you want to be telepathic, Jake, old buddy?

"Whaddya say we blow de tree wide tree tings quick on somet'in' harmless," Fast Eddie whispered, "before we get ourselves inta trouble, here?"

Long-Drink gently put a hand over Eddie's mouth. "What," he asked, "is *absolutely guaranteed* harmless?"

"Well," Doc Webster murmured, a timeless, silent time later, "it could be worse."

"How?" I asked mournfully.

"We could be down to *one*," the Doc explained. "This way we have a little room to breathe. Assuming there is anything to this business, which I frankly doubt. But if we screw up too bad the first time, we can always get ourselves out of trouble—or at least back where we started—and still have a backup wi ... option."

"No backup option, Doc," Jordin corrected. "The third one is the most important one of all. Say you're right: we goof the first one, we undo it with the second, and there we are with a cluricaune in the house. The third is our last hope of ever getting rid of him."

"Sure," the Doc said, "ideally we hold Losing The Cluricaune in reserve for our third w—our third expressed desire, naturally. But if we ... choose that one first, there's nobody to grant the other two."

"And you think there's any way in hell that you can get this many people—even *these* people—to agree on *one* choice?" I asked. "Without a fight? Are you ready for that fight, Doc?"

"Jake, it seems to me we have a responsibility—"

I reached an instant, unilateral and irrevocable decision. If even Doc Webster, always one of the

most sensible and wise and level-headed of us, was thinking along these sorts of lines, we were in big trouble. I knew he was wrong. He was being as reasonable and logical as any chump protagonist in a fantasy story; 100,000 stories said he was thinking like a victim. We had to break the mold somehow, move laterally.

But I was not sure I had the emotional weight to sway the gang from his way of thinking—and that made me a little frantic. Any one of them could doom us all, any second, with the best of intentions and a single sentence. Damn it, this was *my* bar! It was up to *me* to decide who had what responsibilities to whom in here. If any of us was going to bear the weight of this, it had to be me. So I made a choice that hadn't even gotten onto my preliminary ballot. To assert my authority—I yelped for higher authority.

"God," I said loudly, cutting the Doc off, "I wish Mike Callahan was here right now."

A great shout went up—

PART THREE: THE MICK OF TIME

My, didn't Mike look surprised when he materialized there in front of my bar?

I was a little startled, myself. The big mick was stark naked, and even more red-faced than usual. From these and other evidences, it was apparent that I had caught him in the midst of a tender ... well, no, possibly more of a volcanic ... moment with Lady Sally McGee, or some designated alternate. Even the cluricaune—who had roused from his stupor the instant I'd spoken my wish—opened his drunken eyes wide at the sight, and stared in uncharacteristic silence. Mike, of course shifted mental gears in something under a second.

"The saints preserve us with BHT," he boomed cheerfully, "I thought I'd seen the last of you mugs. *How in the name of God's gilded gonads did I get here? Jake?*"

My heart was hammering like mad. No, like glad. Just the sight of the Mick of Time was enough to make me feel that same fierce joy I'd felt last night, when my friends had come through my door for the first time in much too long. "Hi, Mike. It's not a short story...."

He nodded easily. He had already ... uh ... regained his aplomb. "You know me," he said. "I got time."

Then there was a brief interruption. I was the first to lose it, vaulting over the bar, but I only led the pack by instants. I will simply say that not one of us felt the slightest hesitation or awkwardness in hugging a big naked Irishman ... and if you find anything weird in that, I condemn you to live in that skull for the rest of your life.

Isham and Tanya kept guard, of course, but I think everyone else managed to slip into and out of that gang hug before it was through. We were all laughing and crying and considerably less worried than we had been.

All except me. As I stood back and let my friends have a chance to hug our mentor, I got in about ten seconds of happiness. And then I had a thought that made me literally bite my tongue. If I could wish Mike Callahan into my bar, why *couldn't I wish Mary Callahan-Finn into my bar, into my arms again?*

Barbara and Jessica had been gone for nearly two decades—my mother even longer. But Mary had only been lost to me for a period measurable in months.

Of course, she was married now. To a guy that blew up planets sometimes. A good friend of mine, besides.

(I winced, remembering something from my browse through Irish history—the Finn Cycle. Finn MacCool fell for Cormac's daughter Grainne, but she eloped with a member of his own band—much the way Mary dumped me for my pal *Mickey* Finn. The second-century Finn betrayed his friend and stole his beloved back, and ultimately died by treachery himself.)

Fast Eddie ducked outside to fetch a spare pair of work pants from Isham's truck (Ish being the only one whose pants would fit Callahan). Once he'd stepped into them, Mike spotted the stranger in the crowd, walked over and offered the Duck his hand. "Howdy, friend. I'm Mike."

"Hi," the Duck said. "I'm Ernie."

Callahan looked the hairy little guy over. "I like your comeek strip." He took the Duck's hand and shook it, and the Duck blinked at him in obvious bafflement.

"Mike," I said, "you and Ernie need to talk, later, but just now we got a small problem—"

"So I can see," he rumbled, gazing into the twinkling eyes of the cluricaune, and twinkling right back at him. "A cluricaune, sure as me mother was Irish! Good cess to you, Naggeneen!"

"Call me a blatherskite—Brian Boru!" the cluricaune cried tipsily. "Good evenin', yer Majesty, glad you could visit! And how are they keepin' in old Tir Na Nog?"

If there's anything Mike Callahan knows, it's how to humor a drunk. "Oh, merry as ever—not unlike yourself."

"Your Majesty, tell these Fomorians here to unchain me! I'm caught fair and square and I'll give me parole."

"What's in it for me if I do?" Callahan asked.

"A reasonable question." The cluricaune's pipe flew up from below him and found its place in his teeth. "I've got it, bejabbers! I'll put my request in the form of a wager, and you be the judge if I win it or not. If I make every soul in this room drop their jaw—in a minute or less—and with two little questions—can I be restored to the use of me hands?"

With two questions? "This oughta be good, Mike," I said. "Some of us here didn't drop our jaws when he turned invisible."

The cluricaune cackled loudly. "It's not an illusion I offer yez here, t'is a fact—one you *know*, that's been sittin' right under yer face all yer life—you'll never believe that yez missed it yerselves!"

Mike looked to me. "Your bar, Jake."

A thrill went through me at those words. Like the first time my father ever said to me, "It's your house, son." I filed it for later basking.

"Well," I said slowly, "he knows where *my* buttons are located. Will he keep his parole? Obey us 'til our business is done?"

"I swear by me beard that I shall—an' a cluricaune's word is as good as his bond," the little man proclaimed.

"How good is his bond, Mike?" Fast Eddie asked.

"Good, Eddie," Callahan said. "As good as those bonds you got him in, anyway—and lots better than the ones they use on Wall Street. A little slipperier, maybe. You gotta be careful *what* word, what bond. But this seems pretty safe."

"Well, I do hate to keep a guest in irons if it's not absolutely necessary," I said. "Not that burning curiosity has any influence on my thinking. Go ahead," I told the cluricaune. "*Etonne-moi!*"

He contrived to bow in handcuffs. "Thank you, Your Worship. It's curious you should be speakin' in French, for the story I have for yez starts out in Cannes, the cinema festival place—oh, there's champion drinkin' there, almost as much as Oktoberfest, even a cluricaune can't make a dent in the liquor supply. So I go there one year, oh, a decade ago, and I find meself there in a tavern. And who should be sittin' across from me, sharin' a dram, but that big Orson Welles and that Mankiewicz feller, director and writer of *Citizen Kane!* I bought them a drink on it, told 'em how much I admired their movie—"

I had my eye on the clock. I intended, since Mike had said duricaunes were literal-minded, to hold him to his one-minute deadline ... and so far I didn't see him *near* a jaw-dropping punchline. So he'd met some celebrities, once....

"—And said I'd a question I wanted to ask them, a question pertainin' to *Citizen Kane*. Well, Orson and Herman most graciously said they'd be happy to answer whatever I asked. So I sez to 'em, 'Right at the start o' yer movie Charles Foster Kane dies alone, am I right?' And Welles nods and Mankiewicz says, 'Quite alone.'

One question down. I mentally checked my jaw. Still in place.

The cluricaune took inventory of the room with his sparkling eyes, with the same result, and then grinned broadly. He spoke slowly now, drawing it out for effect. "So I says to them, '*How in the world, then, does anyone know that his last word is Rosebud?*'"

Thunderstruck. That's the word I want. You like to think you belong to an intelligent species, and

then something like this comes along. The film generally agreed to be the greatest ever made, certainly the most studied and analyzed movie of all time—had a hole in its plot you could drive a freight-train through, *in the first minute*. The entire premise of the film was logically impossible ... and no one in all the world but the cluricaune had ever noticed it before. I didn't see one face that didn't have a dropped jaw.

The most amazing part is that there are probably a dozen ways Welles and Mankiewicz could have solved their problem, without spoiling the solitude of Kane's death. It could have been fixed *after* the close of principal photography, with a voiceover. (Kane had just finished dictating his will into a wire recorder as— A freak echo in the heating pipes conveyed his voice to the attic, where a maid—A bug planted by his enemies—) But Mankiewicz and Welles simply never noticed the problem existed. Nor anyone else.

Mike Callahan broke the awed silence. "Turn him loose, Tanya—he's won the bet."

Tanya shook off her stasis, closed her mouth, and produced a key.

"Christ," Herb burst out, maddened beyond endurance, "*what did Welles and Mankiewicz say?*"

The cluricaune waited until Tanya had freed him, then lurched to his feet (two feet off the ground, mind) and said slyly, "What's in it for me if I tell yez?"

Callahan had to grin. "A reasonable question. Jake?"

I sighed. "Tom says there's a few more cases of stuff out in the van. You want to bring in a case of scotch, Tom?"

The cluricaune turned up his nose.

I sighed again. Well, it was worth it to hear the answer. "Make it a case of Tully."

He nodded acceptance.

When Tom came in the door with the case of Tullamore Drew, he nearly dropped it—for the instant he crossed the threshold, its weight diminished drastically. He appeared to try and fling it at the ceiling and changed his mind. The cluricaune's eyes began to glow like inspection ports in the wall of Hell.

"Welles looks at Mankiewicz, pale as a haddock," he said in a sing-song voice, "and Mankiewicz looks back at him in return ... and together they puts down their drinks on the table, unfinished, and rises together and shows me their backs, and be damned if a word I could get from them after! Now dip me if th4t isn't excellent liquor—and Jasus, it's good to be shut o' the darbies—WHEE!"

Suddenly he was dancing a jig in midair, bounding high and recovering, drunk as a lord on the first of May. He kept missing steps and falling through his invisible floor, then swinging back up to try again, arms flailing wildly. People ducked out of his way. Glassware shattered. Ish stumbled into a table and demolished it. And then it got bad.

The cluricaune began to sing—

"When-a you swim inna da sea, an' a eel bites-a you knee, dat's a moray—"

There were howls of pain. The cluricaune laughed uproariously and kept reeling about like Zorba on acid, trailing peat fumes.

"—A New Zealander man with a permanent tan, that's a Maori—"

Jordin and Mary Kay Kare, who between them write really *good* parody songs, bellowed in protest and tried to bulldog the cluricaune together. Good thing they're married; they ended up on the floor in the missionary position.

"—when two patterns combine, in a way serpentine, that's a moire—"

Doc Webster was aghast. He was being outpunned, in his own lair, by a drunken fairy.

Pausing only to kiss his wife (a good man in a crunch), Jordin sprang to his feet and located my fire extinguisher. Mary Kay instantly leapt for cover. I opened my mouth in alarm

"—He tells jokes, he's a ham; his last name's Amsterdam—dat's-a Morey!"

—and closed it again. Jordin's a physicist, whose specialty is laser-guided propulsion systems for spacecraft (the idea is, leave the engine at home, where it's convenient to work on), and he knows more than most about tracking moving objects. So I let him have his shot.

If the Defense Department had seen Jordin's performance that night, they'd never let him do any physics. He kept the stream from the fire extinguisher trained on the capering cluricaune, never losing him

for more than an instant.

"—*if yer vitamins be mostly C, D and E . . . take some more A—*"

Jordin gave up when it became clear that the cluricaune's voluminous beard, twirling around him, could absorb as much as Jordin could deliver. The little man seemed to enjoy it.

Jordin's magnificent shooting was not completely without effect, however. It reminded the cluricaune of something. He lurched to a halt near the door, turned his back to us, fumbled briefly, and began urinating into the umbrella stand. Through his beard.

"—*Oh, you lay 'What I Say' very gay—won't you play that some more, Ray?—*"

A roar of general outrage was building to a crescendo. It was even *harder* to take without a drink for insulation. Sooner or later my patrons would remember that outside was the only place they were liable to *get* a drink tonight; once that happened an exodus would begin.

I was *not* going to let my bar be emptied on its second night by a dipsomaniac dwarf, with Mike Callahan looking on.

I reached under the bar, took out my Ted Williams Classic, and brought it down on the bar so hard the sound was like a rifle shot. Even the cluricaune was startled. He spun around.

People scattered out of his way.

I thundered at him. "You swore you'd obey me, you mannerless clown. Now put that away and shut up and sit down!"

To my surprise, it worked. Maybe the fact that it happened to come out as a rhymed couplet helped. Or maybe a cluricaune's word *is* as good as his bond. In any case, he ceased micturating, adjusted things behind that beard, and sat down on air without uttering another sound. The silence was deafening.

"Nicely done, Jake," Callahan said.

I warmed. "Thanks, Mike. You said he was careful about words. Uh ... maybe you can guess the nature of our immediate problem?"

He nodded. "It's coming to me. He gave you three wishes, didn't he? And I'm one of 'em."

I winced. But of course it was not the *noun* "wish" that was dangerous, only the verb. "You're the first. We started thinking about what to pick ... and about the time we started to bite ourselves in the small of the back, I decided to ask your advice. I felt like I was ... I *still* feel like I'm juggling old nitroglycerine."

"You are," he agreed. "Got a plan?"

"Excuse me, Jake," Isham said, brushing sawdust off himself and approaching the bar. "I don't mean to interrupt, but I want you to take this for that table I just totaled." He tried to put money on the bar.

I pushed it back. "Forget it, man. I can fix it."

He pushed the money toward me. "It's cracked down the middle."

I pushed his money away again. "Yeah, but I still think I—"

He shook his head. "No way do I want to be remembered like Big Beef McCaffrey." Big Beef once put a crack down the middle of the front door of Callahan's Place, with his head, on the way out—and for the next thirty-nine years, the story was still being told to newcomers. "I'm buying you a new table," he said, pushing the money toward me a third time.

"Isham," Tom Hauptman said, "at this point, there's no telling if we're still going to be *open* tomorrow night—"

"It doesn't matter," Tanya said. "Take the cash, Jake. I'll drag him here tomorrow night one way or another, and you can give him back the money when I show Ish that table repaired. I know you're a pretty good carpen—"

* * *

"AAAAARGH!"

Well, actually, five or six of us shouted different things, but the net effect was sort of an "AAAAARGH!"

The table was repaired. Without a crack.

"Naggeneen," I said to the cluricaune, "what are you trying to pull?" But I knew.

And he knew I knew. We all knew. "Plain as the nose on your face—and that's plain as can be—did I hear the young lady a moment ago," he cackled gleefully. "Shall we hear it again?" He put a finger up his nose, like the guy in the Monty Python sketch, and we all heard, with perfect fidelity, Tanya's voice say for a second time, "... I sho' wish that table repaired."

"Now wait a goddamn minute," Doc Webster said slowly. "I can accept the first wish. We know Mike travels through time without any hardware, so why can't a cluricaune know how to do it *for* him? But dammit, *this* one is just plain flat-out impossible."

Don't ever say that to a physicist. "Doc," Jordin Kare said gently, "all atoms are constantly in motion. It is a matter of overwhelming statistical probability that all the atoms in you will never happen to all move *in the same direction, all, at once*, but to state that the odds against an event are a quintillion to one is to assert that the event is possible. You've seen the Lucky Duck play tricks with probability. And if you accept time-travel at all, then why can't a table move a few minutes backwards in time? How do you *know* entropy is irreversible?"

The Doc opened his mouth, and shut it again.

"Aw shit, Jake, I'm sorry," Tanya said. "It just slipped out."

"Glad I could be of some service," the cluricaune said, and burst into gales of laughter, rocking back and forth in his tailor's seat. "Darlin', t'is pity ye don't keep yer brains in yer dumplin' shop—oh, I could have me a smack at your muns, ye enormous mavourneen! Two o' yer wishes is gone up in smoke. But one of 'em left—t'is a wonderful joke!"

There was a roar of outrage at this sophistry—but we had all known he took things literal-mindedly, had cautioned ourselves to be careful a dozen times: he had us dead to rights.

Suddenly, through the rooba-ing, came the startling sound of Noah Gonzalez laughing along with the cluricaune. Some of us glared at him.

"Sorry, gang," Noah said, trying to stop laughing and failing. "Just reminded me of one of my oldest nightmares. I'm working on a voice-activated bomb, and this cub reporter sneaks past all the uniforms, and fires a flashbulb over my shoulder and says: "That'll make a nice blow-up!" He lost it and folded over in his chair, hooting.

One by one, we all broke up.

Well, it was either that, or fall on the cluricaune with our hands and teeth, I guess. Maybe another barful of people would have chosen the latter. Some guys step on a rake in the dark, and get mad and go punch somebody. Others step on a rake in the dark, and fall down laughing at themselves. I know which kind of guy I'd rather be. So do my friends. Over the years, together, we had come to learn that if you get a chance to turn anger into laughter, that will be a good thing to do. I know I was glad the laughter gave me an excuse to put that silly baseball bat back underneath the bar again.

And it *was* funny, if you thought about it. We'd been handed one of mankind's age-old dreams ... and here we were, stumbling around like Keystone Cops, chasing our miracle like Chaplin chasing his hat. And furthermore, being beaten, in our own house, at our own game: merriment.

For there was no denying that the cluricaune was having a better time in our bar than we were. We were accustomed to thinking of ourselves as a jolly crew—and he made us look like Baptists. He had outsung, out-danced, outpunned, outdrunk, outraged and outfoxed the lot of us, from the moment we'd clapped him in irons and put him in our thrall—and we had reacted pretty much like a convention of narcotics officers confronted by Hunter Thompson.

By God, when was the last time *I* had been having such a good time I'd urinated into the umbrella stand? Was I getting *old*, for Chrissakes? So the little guy had a commanding voice. Didn't that describe Long-Drink after the eighth drink? Or for that matter, Eddie in the best of times? What did I care about the damned umbrella stand? For that matter, what the hell did I even *have* one for? Not one of us owned an umbrella: thanks to Mickey Finn, it was no longer possible for any of Callahan's regulars to get rained on....

So he'd offered us three wishes. This was something to hate him for? Just because we were too dumb to meet their challenge?

The general laughter gained strength; we howled until the tears came, and beyond. I hadn't laughed that hard since ...

... Since I'd been in Callahan's Place.

The cluricaune whooped along with us. And not at us. The difference was clear.

"Oh Lord," I said when I could form words, "it's almost worth losing my whole stock, to have had a laugh like that. No, it *is* worth it. Ah Naggeneen, you slippery bugger, I'd have pissed meself if you hadn't siphoned me kidneys."

He wiped his own streaming eyes. "Faith, I do like a lad who can laugh at himself. Yer a fair jolly dog, Mr. Publican, damned if you ain't, and I take off me cap to ye!" He did so, with a grand tipsy flourish. "And the same for yer company—champion laughers, the lot of yez. I haven't had me a giggle like that since the reign o' Queen Dick!"

"The *what?*" Fast Eddie asked sotto voce.

"It's Irish for 'never,' Eddie," the Duck explained. I was startled. There was no sneer in his voice, no rude parody of patience. He just answered Eddie's question.

Doc Webster was the first to achieve full sobriety. "Well, Jacob," he said, "it seems to me our problem has sort of solved itself, wouldn't you say? I mean, I hate to break up this happy gathering; that belly laugh *was* worth a lot, and I'm grateful for it, but unless we want it to be the proverbial Last Laugh here, there's only one choice for Number Three. Right?"

"What's the hurry?" Shorty Steinitz muttered.

"I think we just proved kind of conclusively that the longer we put it off, the more trouble we're likely to get in," the Doc said. "Like Jake said before, like Noah said, think of a ticking bomb. Suppose Tanya had said ... no, see, I'm doing it *again*. Fun is fun, but it's time to bottle it up and go."

I turned to Callahan. "What about you, Mike?"

"What about me?"

"Don't you ... uh ... need a ride home?"

That got a feeble rooba. Probably most people had the same quick flash I did: *lose the cluricaune, and then keep Mike Callahan here with us forever—*

—a prisoner of fairy magic. Right!

But Mike was shaking his head. "Like the Doc reminded you, Jake: I don't use a time machine to get around. I don't need any special equipment to get back home. I'll leave when I'm ready. The ball's in your court. The Doc is right: whatever you're fixing to do, t'were best done pronto. Looked at a certain way, people are essentially wish-generators, with no off-switch, and they're dangerous when armed. We can't help brimming with wishes, and most of them would kill us or worse if they ever came true. Sooner or later, somebody here's going to start sub-vocalizing what they're thinking."

In the midst of everything I became aware of the fact that the Duck was staring at me with great intensity. Even more than everyone else present, he hung on my next words for some reason. I took a deep breath—

"Hold it!" Doc Webster commanded. "Before you take any irrevocable steps, there's something I've got to do."

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Swing," I said.

He waddled over to where the cluricaune sat cross-legged on nothing. The wizened little fairy regarded him without fear but with respectful attention.

The Doc planted his feet, threw his arms wide, rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and opened his mouth. As he sang, "*When . . . a . . .*" dragging it out theatrically like a ham baritone, people began to smile in sudden understanding, and the cluricaune's eyes sparkled merrily.

"—*Canadian shows you his mother, he goes:*

"*Dat's my mawr, eh?*"

The cluricaune roared. "A new one, bedad, and I thought I knew all of 'em—good on ye, mister!" Those of us who had gotten enough strength back laughed with him, and clapped our hands, and banged our empty steins on the bar and tables. Doc Webster had upheld the honor of the house.

The Doc inclined his head with massive dignity, and stepped back. Tanya stepped forward. She

cleared her throat. The cluricaune widened his eyes. And Tanya sang:

"With the high price of feed, it's for farmers in need

"That some mow hay. . . ."

More laughter and applause, this time with an element of groan in it, true, but still a good hand, from human and cluricaune alike.

I threw caution to the winds and came around my bar. The cluricaune whooped even louder when he saw me coming. "Yet *another?*" he cried. "Ah, ye're thunderin' geniuses!" Off to my right, Eddie gave me an intro chord on his piano.

"My new ray-gun here tries to put out both your eyes:

"It's a Moe-Ray. . . ."

Apparently his knowledge of American cinema ranged from *Kane* all the way down to the Three Stooges: he laughed so hard he lost his pipe. The applause I got sounded, to my totally unbiased ear, almost equal to what the Doc had drawn, but not so much more than Tanya's that I had to feel embarrassed. I bowed slightly to all, and went back around the bar to pronounce sentence.

And the Duck—of all people—left his chair for the first time that night, and approached the cluricaune.

"Faith, there *can't* be another," the little old man gasped.

Trying as hard as possible to appear bored, the Duck sang—in an unexpectedly magnificent, operatic tenor:

"If King Kong has gone flat, rent the flick Vampire Bat:

"That's some more Wray. . . ."

In the explosion of mirth that ensued, the cluricaune's teeth left his head and began caromming around the room like a runaway hedge-clipper, still laughing.

A long, breathless time later, he drew himself unsteadily to his feet and held out his hands. His teeth and pipe returned to him, and docked without assistance. He spun in midair to face me, bowed so grandly he lost the cap, and caught it as it went by his feet.

"I take off me lid to yez, woman an' man," he said. "Ye've taken me best and ye've given it back to me. This is a house I'll be sorry to leave—but I guess you'll be wantin' me off o' yer premises. Hoo, an' can't say I blame yez atall: I've a terrible case o' the ol' barrel fever, I know it; it's part of me nature and cannot be helped. I'd drink every night nearly twice what I've guzzled tonight if I stayed. So let's have it over with: wish your third wish, an' I'll be on my way, leavin' thanks for the laughter you gave me today."

I looked at Mike Callahan. He looked back at me. In his face I saw his daughter Mary's face, only a wish away from Mary's Place ...

... And for a moment, it seemed to me I could hear her husband Mickey's voice, crying in anguish on the night he'd first come to Earth, saying, "*I did not know that you had love!*"

I turned to the cluricaune. And in that moment I became mature enough to accept the help of magic in solving my problem.

"Nobody here wants you gone, Naggeneen," I said. "I just wish to God that you'd pay for your drinks like a gentleman—"

Mike waved at me frantically, mimed playing with a yo-yo.

Oh Christ, that was close! "—without, let me add, ever using your *Spre na Skillenagh*; I want honest money." I thought for a moment he was going to erupt in a towering rage. Instead, he began to laugh and laugh and laugh. If we could laugh at ourselves, his pride would not let him do less. "Done," he choked amid his guffaws. "Ye've quaggled me proper—first time it's happened in two hundred years!"

The cash register went *chung* behind me, and its drawer opened up and began spilling gold coins on my floor.

Pandemonium broke out.

PART FOUR: THE END OF THE PAINBOW

"What de hell kind o' spray was dat you said, Jake?" Eddie called, when the tumult began to die

down.

"The *Spre na Skillenagh*," I repeated. "The 'shilling fortune,' is the English of it. A magic shilling, that always returns to a cluricaune's purse the moment you take your eyes off it, like there was a rubber band on it. He keeps it for the suckers. But cluricaunes *also* always know the location of buried gold, real gold, in large quantities."

Rooba.

"Jake?" Doc Webster said. "Maybe I'm missing something, but what good is all the gold in the world to us if we can't get a drink?"

"But we *can*, Doc," I said. "You just heard Naggeneen here state a maximum capacity."

He blinked. "Huh. That's so. But—"

"What none of you understand," I said, "is that the thirsty little feller is going to be the *saving* of this place."

Rooba rooba.

"What do you mean, Jake?"

"Do you remember the state I got myself into, getting this place ready to open, Doc?"

"Well ... yeah."

"Now, you know me, Doc. Look around this place. Is there anything you see here that could have caused me that much grief?"

"Well, no, not really, now that you mention it. I *did* wonder what you were sweating so hard."

"*I was sweating how to pay for this place*," I said. "Remember how I said last night I was tripling the price of a drink, and everybody carefully didn't flinch? Fifty cents higher and some of you *would* have flinched, and rightly too, the amount of sauce we go through. I've been running around like a rat in my skull, working arithmetic over and over. I've sunk every cent of my savings in this, and so have you all, and there's no way in hell it can pay for itself " I turned to Mike. "I never appreciated just what a miracle-worker you are, Michael, until I costed it out for the eighty-fifth time."

He smiled. "I had certain advantages not available to you, son."

"I know that now. I think I knew it then: I just never thought about it. But even you might not believe what they're getting for glasses nowadays."

"Yeah, there's a big sand shortage. Still, bars do stay open, somehow."

I shrugged. "Half of 'em are probably laundering cash for the syndicate. All I can tell you is, for months I have juggled the figures—and the only way I could see of keeping this place open past six months was to triple our clientele. Which would destroy the place as effectively as a sheriff's padlock on the door. Certainly the getting telepathic part."

"Jesus, Jake," Long-Drink said accusingly, "you never told us—"

"And what if I had?" I asked him. "What could any of you have done? You've already all given 'til it hurts, Drink. Was I supposed to never have opened? Or soured the six months it looked like we were gonna have, by telling everybody there was a doomsday clock ticking? How did I know?—maybe we could all manage to *get* telepathic in six months, and clean up on Wall Street or something."

I flung my arms out expansively and grinned.

"Oh Jesus, it was tearing me up inside—but I'm free, by God, as of tonight! You heard what the Naggeneen said: he can drink the place dry twice a night: *he's just tripled our clientele—without* clumsying up the place with a mob of uncouth strangers. Doc, *we're covered!*"

A rafter-ringing cheer went up. Folks took the cluricaune gently in hand, and together they hoisted him up to their shoulders, and tossed him exuberantly up to those rafters; he laughed like a child and let gravity have him, fell back to be tossed up again, and again. Callahan grinned like a bandit and gave me his hand. I shook it contentedly.

I had not taken unfair profit from fairy magic. I had not plundered gold I had not earned, had not used a *Spre na Skillenagh* to pay my distributors, nor any other sort of cheat with a karmic backlash. I'd simply taken on one ... er ... jolly green client, with the thirst of a hundred men. A lonely great-grandson of Bacchus who would probably end up greying my hair, and classing my joint up considerably.

"Thanks for that footnote; that saved us," I told Callahan.

"You're welcome," he said with a wink of his eye.

I reached under the bar, took out a cylinder made of aluminum, twisted the end off, and dumped out what looked and what smelled like a coprolite. Callahan stared and then started to smile. "That isn't—"

"Be damned if it isn't: it's one of your miserable rotten cigars. I stepped on it as I was leaving, that night in the woods. It was radioactive, the first year or so, but I handled it carefully. Sort of a souvenir of you ... to help me remember the kind of a stinker you were."

He stuck the thing into his grin, and set it alight with the tip of his thumb. As always, the thing smelled a *little* bit better on fire. When the first puff diffused throughout the room, all the cheering and laughter redoubled anew, as that hideous scent we remembered of old worked its magic on all of our subconscious minds.

"Does it make an appreciable difference," I asked, "the thing being seven years stale?"

"Oh, it does," he assured me. "It's just getting ripe."

"Naggeneen," I called out, "I no longer compel you, but maybe between us we might make a bargain as equals and friends with a terrible thirst."

He paused in midair at the top of a leap. "Speak on, for ye interest me strangely," he said.

"Have you had enough spirit to take off the *edge* of your thirst for the evening, at least?"

"I might have," he said.

"There's a case of Black Bush sitting out in the truck, and a room full of sufferers long out of luck. It's a reasonable man I believe that you are—if I send for that case, will it get to my bar?" I pointed to the special Bush-mill's backup-shelf beside The Fount, about as long as the cluricaune was tall. "You can have all the bottles that fit on that shelf, but leave all the rest for my friends and myself."

Again, maybe rhyming it helped. "It's a bargain," he shouted, and people applauded until they were hoarse.

About a hundred Irish coffees later, the supply ran out again, and I was finally able to take a breather. I took my own mug of God's Blessing, feeling that I had earned it, and looked for someone to talk with. One large group was gathered around Mike, over by the fireplace, all talking and listening and laughing at once. Another large group huddled around the cluricaune, listening to him bullshit. A third group was dancing gaily to Eddie's piano, smiling fiercely with tears running down their cheeks.

And down at the end of the bar, watching it all in the flickering firelight ... the Duck.

I wandered over.

"I could pretend to be polishing the bartop," I said softly.

He spun round in his chair so fast it was hard not to flinch. But when he was facing me, his expression was not angry, but ...

Well, I didn't know what it was. All that hair on his face didn't leave a lot of room for expression to express itself. All I could say for sure was that the permanent sneer I'd thought the natural shape of his face was gone now.

"Mister Stonebender," he said to me, in an oddly formal tone, "I liked what you did just now. You and your friends. If a walking thirst is welcome here, would it be all right if I hung around here and tried to get telepathic with you people?"

I was touched, and moved by how much effort it had cost him to ask. "All right?" I repeated. "I think it would be world-class, Mr. Shea."

He gave me his hand, and I shook it solemnly.

A corner of his mouth twitched. "Kind of hard to square getting telepathic with that house custom of yours, coldcocking anybody that asks a snoopy question. Or is that just with newcomers?"

I shook my head. "That's the right way to *get* telepathic: walking on eggshells, with the awareness that a mistake could put a knot on your own skull. It's *dark* in there. Look, how about if I try to read just what's right up on the *top* of your mind, now? Just the headlines."

He scratched his hairy head and thought about it. "The ones above the fold."

"Sure. Hey, Mike! You got a minute?"

Callahan excused himself from the group and came over. Brian Boru, the cluricaune had called him. Hell, for all I know, maybe Mike *had* been King of Ireland at the turning of the last Millennium—and Ca Chullain a millennium before that, too, for that matter. I saw him deal with Hitler as an equal, once. All I can tell you is, barefoot and barechested, wearing another man's trousers and trailing clouds of toxic waste, he strode through my place like a king. He slid gracefully into a tall chair next to the Duck, and saluted him with a half-empty glass of the Black Bush.

The Duck nodded back at him and turned to me. "Not bad, pal," he said judiciously. "You don't miss a lot."

"Go on, ask him," I said.

He shrugged, and turned back to Callahan. "Mike, I'd—"

"You want to know," Callahan said, "some stuff about yourself. And what I meant by that dopey joke about your comeek."

The Duck raised an eyebrow. "You guys volley pretty good around here."

"I haven't even started," Mike said. "The Great Miasmo sees all, tells all. Tell me how close I come." He put his head back and recited softly. "You're special. Things go haywire around you. It's like you sweat practical jokes. The laws of probability don't apply to you. I heard people call you the Duck: that must be short for The Lucky Duck, right?"

"Go on," the Duck said tightly. "You're doing great."

"There isn't a mountain from one end of Long Island to the other, so you must live in some kind of ruin."

The Duck nodded, frowning. "An abandoned mansion. I usually pick places like that. I don't bother anybody there—or get bothered—and if I need any food or water or electricity ... well, I seem to get lucky. Go on."

"Your mother—"

"Yah?" the Duck said sharply.

"I mean no disrespect," Callahan said carefully, "in discussing your mother. If it helps any, my wife is a madam. But would I be correct in guessing that your mother is ... of in excess of average stature, like yourself? And perhaps, also what some might consider ... more hirsute than average, again like yourself?"

The Duck waved his hand, to show he took no offense. "Short as a fireplug, hairy as a—she taught me how to shave, OK?"

"And she always took you for wild rides on her back, when you were a kid."

"You must be readin' my mail," the Duck said.

"The only part I can't figure out," Callahan said, stroking his bristly chin, "is why you aren't wearing any red."

The Duck's eyes widened. "Ma has a fetish about that. She made me swear never to put on anything red as long as I lived ... thinks it's the color of the Devil."

"Ah," Callahan said. "Much becomes clear to me now."

The Duck slowly regained his characteristic expression—bored scorn—and put it on like a raincoat. "Look, Sherlock Holmes," he said, "nobody likes being gaslighted more than me—I've been known to drive hundreds of miles to get jerked around by total strangers—but if you know what you know, then you know it's the *mystery of my goddamn life* you're screwing with here. String it out as long as you like—I'm not a killjoy—but when you finally get to the blow-off of this pitch, when you're ready to read my leaves or do my chart or whatever it is you're gonna do, would you wake me up?"

Mike was immediately apologetic. "I am sorry, Ernie. Sometimes I get too cute for the room. I'll tell you anything you want—and lead you if you can't find the right questions, OK?"

"What's a Fir Darrig?" the Duck asked.

The moment he said the term, I remembered how alarmed he had looked, the first time he'd heard me use it, in the course of explaining to the group about the Daoine Sidh. I had misunderstood the reason for his dismay, then. Because when *he* pronounced "Fir Darrig," now, I realized at once that I had already heard him say it once before.

When he had told me the name his mother had always called his absentee father. "Feared Eric," I'd

heard him say, at the time.

"A Fir Darrig, often called the Red Man, is one of the Daoine Sidh," Callahan said promptly. "Like a cluricaune, he tends to attach himself to a house or locality, rather than to a family. Stands about three to four feet high on average, always dresses in redcap and coat, and has a remarkable voice, described as *ceileabhar na néan*, the warbling of birds. They are the practical jokers of the Daoine Sidh. Mischievous jokes if they like you, mean-spirited ones if you offend them, really nasty ones if you threaten someone they love. They sort of exhale good and bad luck. Which can mean hell to pay for those around them."

The folks at Mary's Place are better than average at eavesdropping. People had been doing so for the last few minutes, and even I'd had to look sharp to catch them at it—but now one or two of them smothered a rooba.

The Duck glared at them ... and then sighed. "Listen up, people," he said in a *ceileabhar na nan*. Heads turned, with politely expectant expressions. "Callahan here has just told me that I'm the son of a Fir Darrig. One of those Deeny Shee jokers, like our friend Naggeneen. Apparently I'm one of the Gods of Practical Joking on my father's side."

There was a thoughtful pause. "I buy dat," Eddie said.

"Yeah, that does explain a lot," Doc Webster said. "Good for you, Duck-O."

"Why, that's wonderful, Ernie," Merry Moore said. "It must be nice to have that cleared up, huh?"

"I should have suspected," the cluricaune whooped happily. "The first time I've ever been tricked into payin' for liquor, I should have suspected a Fir Darrig's hand. It's clever indeed that yer not wearin' red: it misled me entire. Good jape, Brother Duck, and I drink to yer health!" He flung an empty Bushmill's bottle into the fireplace—several other receptacles followed it in—and led a round of applause.

"Congratulations, Duck," Long-Drink McGonnigle said respectfully. "There was a time in my youth when I'd have worshipped you."

"A lot of people have that reaction to me," the Duck said.

"Mike," I said, "when I first met Ernie, I found myself speaking Gaelic to him. Any idea what that was?"

He nodded. "He'd just asked if he could warm himself at your fire, right? And you'd said sure."

"Come to think of it, yeah."

"That was your blood coming through, Jake me boy, saving your Irish butt. Instinct, something your grandmother told you when you were little, something you read and forgot, I don't know. You said, *Na dean fochmuid fain,* or 'Do not mock us.' It's the only salutation that guarantees a Fir Darrig won't play any *harmful* pranks on your house."

"I wondered why I took such an instant liking to you, stringbean," the Duck told me.

He *had*? If that was true, I hoped I'd never see him suffer a fool.

"OK," he went on, "this is good, this is interesting, let's keep this up. So I'm a half-breed Fir Darrig. Practical jokes, riveting voice, sensitive nature, short and hairy, it all fits. Let me see if I can work this out: I can't *control* my practical jokes because I've only got half the genes for it, right? Wait! Do you suppose the *color* could have anything to do with it? You said Fir Darrigs always wear red—could it be that if I were to ... no, that's crazy. Ma never said a word about my screwball luck, never mentioned it, but I knew it drove her just as crazy as it did me. She'd never have prevented me from learning how to control it, and she's the one who made me swear never to wear red—"

"I'm afraid, son," Callahan said, "that you only have half the story."

The Duck stood very still and closed his eyes. He unclenched his hands a finger at a time and put them down at his sides. "Straighten me," he breathed, and opened his eyes. "'Cause I'm ready."

"Son, you're a pooka on your mother's side."

The Duck did not react in any *visible* way. Neither did anyone.

Then Doc Webster cleared his throat. "Excuse me. Mike?"

"Yeah, Doc?"

"Look, I decided awhile ago I was never gonna let anything blow my mind again. Hanging around

you, it was kind of self-defense, you know? I've accepted everything from a talking dog to a cockroach from outer space to a cluricaune with the power to grant buggerin' wishes, and I haven't complained, have I?"

"No, Sam, you haven't," Callahan agreed.

"Irish fairies, flying saucers, JFK killed by Elvis, whatever: you put it down, I'll pick it up. I just want to be absolutely sure I've got it straight, that's all. So look me square in the eye, and tell me one more time, with a straight face: *the Duck's mom is a seven-foot-tall white rabbit named Harvey?*"

Mike almost smiled. "That movie was as faithful to Irish mythology as a scifi movie is to science. Pookas can manifest as a lot of different animals—goat, horse, bear, wolf but they're always *hairy*, not furry. They're short, not seven-footers, damn near as short as a Fir Darrig or a cluricaune. And they don't just sit around in a white vest, sipping a quiet drink with Jimmy Stewart. They are not especially pixilated or loveable. What they mostly do is scare the shit out of people—"

"—by taking them for wild rides on their back," the Duck said quietly. "Yes?"

"Yep. They mostly live in old ruins, or isolated mountains. They're lonely and quirky and generally considered dangerous."

"And once in a long while, one of them gets lonely and quirky enough to develop a hankering for miscegenation with something exotic. Like a Fir Darrig. And gives *him* a wild ride on her back...."

"If one ever did," the cluricaune said, the compassion of the grandly drunk plain in his voice, "she'd be sure to be spendin' the rest of her days in regret and remorse, with contempt for herself and a black reputation. T'is a union Saint Patrick himself couldn't bless, and a recipe certain for very bad cess."

The Duck spoke to Callahan. "You're telling me that I'm the only person in North America who's *right* when he says, 'Everything screwed-up in my life is my parents' fault!'" Mike took a deep breath. "In a word ... yes."

The Duck closed his eyes and visibly calmed himself. "Ma and I will have to have a little talk," he said gently. He opened his eyes. "No wonder she didn't have any pictures of her parents. No, wait—Jesus Christ! *Ma's always kept a pair of goats. . . .*" He closed his eyes and controlled himself again. "They *acted* like my grandparents, of course, but all goats do that," he said in calm, reasonable tones. "I *thought* Ma spent a lot of time with them."

Rooba rooba

He was quiet for a time, then, and the rest of us fell silent as well.

Well, what *could* you say? Something had to be said, that much was clear. But *what*? "I know how you feel ...?" I racked my brains as the silence stretched out. Something sympathetic? Or was that the wrong tack with this thorny man? Something to try to break the tension? Something macho, stoic? Like what? I looked to Callahan. He shrugged helplessly back at me.

"I know how you feel," Fast Eddie said.

The Duck opened his eyes and blinked at him mildly.

"As for me," Eddie went on, "my fodda was a jackass, an' my mudda was a sow."

In spite of himself, the Duck grinned.

"My parents were both hemosexuals," self-effacing little Pyotr the vampire said truthfully, sipping his Mary's Bloody (Type A).

"I myself am the offspring of a turkey and a barracuda," Long-Drink McGonnigle said, and Doc Webster, who knows the Drink's parents well, went into quiet hysterics, his big belly shaking.

"I am ze son uff a bitch unt a sonofabitch," Ralph von Wau Wau offered. "Alzo, my anzestors were allegedly involded vith sheep a great deal. Ve may haff relatifs in common, Duck."

The Duck began to chuckle softly.

"I'm the product of a swine and a bat, myself," Margie Shorter put in, bringing more laughter.

"Captain Ahab and the Great White Whale, here," Doc Webster said.

"I have it on good authority that both my parents were bear when they conceived me," Shorty Steinitz said, and became the focus of a shower of peanuts and crumpled napkins.

"I'm a Thorne on my mother's side," Tommy Janssen said. "That's what she always says, anyway—"

The Duck was giggling outright now.

"I don't know how to tell all of you this," Isham said, "but my grandfather on my father's side was a white man."

"Jesus, Ish, that's awful!" "Little touch of the lard brush, eh?" "It's not your fault, bro," and "Be strong, homey!" were among the comments heard amid the laughter.

"That's nothing," Marty Matthias called out. "My *mother* is a white man." Whoops. "Hey, listen," Marty's bride Dave said, "you should taste his spaghetti sauce." Louder whoops.

The Duck stopped laughing quite suddenly. He frowned ferociously, took in a very deep breath, and when he spoke I thought we had blown it, thought he was saying, "Bah!" The laughter faltered for a second ... and then returned as we realized he was pulling our chain, was braying not, "Bah," but a goat's "Ba-a-a-a-a-a—"

He finished it with "—humbug!" just the same ... and then threw an arm around Callahan and gave him a squeeze. Amid the applause, Margie Shorter slipped under his other arm. "So tell me, Ernie," she purred, "aside from having enough hair to get a decent grip on, exactly what other characteristics do you share with a goat?"

There were hoots. He blinked at her—Marge is a short woman; they were almost at eye-level—and pursed his lips judiciously, and said, "All I can tell you is ... improbable things happen."

And she shivered deliciously and melted against him as the ovation began. I think only I heard what she murmured to him. "Here's looking at you ... *kid*."

He butted her with his head.

A little later, when the party was in progress once more, the Duck got a chance to finish his conversation with Callahan. Mike explained his original feeble joke about the Ernie Pooka Comeek (You do know about Lynda Barry's comic strip, don't you? If not, a rare privilege awaits you.), and the Duck forgave him for it.

"So if I understand this right, my ... abilities are out of control because I didn't get raised properly. Dad wasn't there to teach me how to be a Fir Darrig, and Ma hated the sound of the word. So what do I do now? Is it like learning to talk, there's a window and then it closes, and it's too late? Or do I make a pilgrimage to Ireland and try to find a Fir Darrig who wants an adopted son so badly he doesn't care if the kid's retarded?"

Callahan put a fresh light to his cigar, then waved his thumbtip out. "I can't really say I have any answers for you, son. I know what I'd do in your shoes."

"What's that?"

"Stay right here and have a drink." The Duck snorted and followed the advice.

"I'm serious," Callahan said. "Hang out with these folks. From what I understand, they have set themselves the goal of becoming mutually telepathic—and furthermore are sensible enough not to be attached to succeeding. That's smart behavior for anybody of any species or race. Furthermore, it calls for an unusual amount of luck—a job with your name on it. And I have a feeling that the doors in your head that you'll have to open to join with them are some of the very doors you need opened to get a handle on your talent. The very first thing necessary to anyone who's weird is a place where they don't give you a hard time just because you're weird."

The Duck looked around him. He slid forward on his chair, held out his half-full glass, and drop-kicked it. It caromed off his foot without tumbling or spilling, and disappeared into the crowd. There was a small, traveling commotion, a startled *gulp*, a small crash and assorted ancillary noises, and the wave of commotion came back through the crowd again. The glass appeared in the air, upright, incoming, and the Duck caught it. It was now half full of peanuts. "Thanks, Duck," Stan called politely.

"I *have* been looking for a place like this for a godawful long time," the Duck admitted in a very soft voice, and ate a peanut.

Suddenly Long-Drink McGonnigle was upon us, bellowing and whooping in acute glee. "Jake! Mike! The penny just dropped!"

"That was my glass," the Duck said.

"No, no, I mean something just occurred to me—no, I mean, something just *failed* to occur to

me—hasn't for hours, in fact, and anybody here will tell you, that's just not normal, certainly not for me; I mean, not getting rained on is fine, but *this* is fantastic!"

"I'm certainly glad you've cleared that up, Drink," the Duck said. "At first I thought you were raving."

"Don't you get it? Don't all of you get it?" He turned around and addressed the room, at the top of his lungs: "WE ARE THE MOST FORTUNATE HUMANS ON EARTH!"

From his piano, Fast Eddie said quietly, "Hell, we know dat, Phil." Long-Drink was practically tearing his hair. "Jesus, don't any of you turkeys see it? We've found the End Of The Rainbow—only there isn't any gold in the pot, that's the glorious part!" He spun on me. "Jake, you genius, you're a genius: no serious drinker who walks in here will ever leave again!" He spun back to the crowd, apoplectic with joy. "You fools, can't you see it? It's right under your belt-buckles!"

People stared.

Long-Drink turned to Callahan. "Mike: in your best professional estimation—excluding our esteemed friend, Naggeneen—how much sauce would you say we've put away since you arrived?"

Callahan looked thoughtful. "I would say ..." He looked around, gauged faces, "... about three quarters of a shitload."

Long-Drink nodded and turned back to the crowd. "Right. Now tell me, you rummies: in all that time *has that door over there swung open once?*' We all followed his pointing finger...

... to the bathroom door. (A single door, marked "Folks.")

"Jesus Christ," Eddie breathed, and hit a discord.

"Well," I said, "that *would* be one side-effect of having a cluricaune around the joint."

Naggeneen whooped drunkenly. "The pleasure's all mine! Sure, a waste is a terrible thing to mind, is it not?"

"That settles it," the Duck said. "I'm staying."