

PROLOGUE

For my soul is filled with evils;
my life is on the brink of the grave.
I am reckoned as one in the tomb:
I have reached the end of my strength,

like one alone among the dead;
like the slain lying in their graves...
--Psalm 88

It was September, 1986, right after I'd returned to Boston from my week in Nashville, when my mother started calling to badger me about the party she was planning for my father's birthday. I would have gone up to New Hampshire anyway--they'd be counting on me to brighten things up--and it irritated me that she was making such a production out of it. It was also weird that she was having it at night. My parents got up so early they were ready for bed by 6, and usually scheduled family gatherings to begin by 1 at the latest.

"Dan will even come down to pick you up," Mom cajoled. Dan? Dan, the youngest of my five brothers, was so busy being a martial arts nut he never had time for anybody. "Oh great," I laughed, careful to keep the edge out of my voice as I looked at my bloodshot eyes in the mirror and groped for a bottle of Visine. "Is he bringing his nunchuks?"

The party was scheduled for a Saturday. That morning I came to, the same mixture of guilt, dread, and nervous exhaustion to which I'd woken every morning for as far back as I could remember hanging over me like a pall. As usual, I was fully dressed: jeans, boots, jacket--I must have stumbled in, once again, and fallen straight to bed. My hands were hanging over the edge, curled a little, as if in self-defense, or expecting a blow. I still had all ten fingers--that was good. I often woke with bruises, black eyes, gashes to my head or knees, and fully expected one morning to find myself missing an arm, a leg...Well, that was the price you had to pay. It wouldn't be that bad--plenty of

people were missing a limb, every life had to have a little pain in it. I was parched, my mouth, throat and cranium on fire from the no doubt packs of cigarettes I'd smoked and untold number of life-sapping drinks I'd downed the night before. Like a vampire, my habit sucked me dry: if I ever tried to give blood, I sometimes reflected, it would come out straight vodka with little pieces of old lime and bent cocktail straws mixed in. I could easily have drunk a gallon of lemonade at one gulp but I knew without looking that the refrigerator was empty. The refrigerator was always empty.

One thing to be grateful for--I peered gingerly to my left to make sure--I was alone. Playing hard to get had never been my strong suit but lately, even I'd been shocked by some of the people I'd brought home. One, apparently some kind of teenage runaway, had stayed a week. Another seemed to have lost his shoes. Then again, what were nice clothes? Or good grammar? Or a full set of teeth? It wasn't everyone that could see through to a person's essence, to his innate goodness and decency. I wasn't just sleeping around, it was part of my...ministry; part of my incessant quest, inextricably intertwined with my quest for the next drink, for The One. Somewhere out there was the man I was destined for, and who was destined for me, and when I found him, peace would be restored, harmony would reign and all my problems would be solved at last. I looked upon finding him as somewhat like looking for a needle in a haystack, a kind of obstacle-strewn treasure hunt, for if I knew one thing it was that the universe was a wily, withholding place, bent on foiling my best-laid plans. That's why the usual mate-snaring spots--the workplace, say, at a job commensurate with one's skills; church functions; dance halls--didn't occur to me for a moment. No, the way I figured it he'd turn up in the LEAST likely place, which for the moment I'd decided was sitting at JT's Place, the old men's bar in North Station I'd taken to frequenting of a morning. There he'd be: manly yet tender, self-deprecating yet strong, tormented yet self-possessed, a mixture of Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Dylan Thomas, Robert Mitchum and Martin Luther King. Someone who saw the truth of the world; the truth of my own quirkily fragile, precious core: the male counterpart, in other words, of me. It was a long shot, JT's, sure, but...I was there. Why not some wild, smart, funny, poetic, well-built, together, sex-starved,

possibly rich guy? Who, like me, also happened to enjoy sitting around a dingy bar with a bunch of wet-brains downing Sea Breezes at eight a.m.?

I loosened my jacket--I couldn't remember the last time I'd worn pajamas--and let my gaze wander around my clutter-strewn, single-room-occupancy loft: dead plants, cracked windows, no sink, no stove--I cooked, if at all, on a hotplate. The bathroom was at the end of the hall. I was an alcoholic, I knew that--and yet to stop...it was impossible to describe the monumental abyss that would mean crossing. My entire identity was tied up in drinking. Every ounce of my mental, emotional, and physical energy was devoted to drinking. My entire life revolved around drinking. And on top of that I was physically addicted: every neuron, every minute of the day and night, cried out for alcohol, like a plant during drought. Not that this for a moment made me want to stop. Or rather, I didn't believe I could stop and therefore I didn't allow myself to want to stop. Everybody drank! Everyone I knew, anyway. You'd drink, too, if you saw the world with as clear an eye as I did. And even I wasn't bad as, say...Blacky. The welfare/SSI guy who lived down the hall. Who sold me beers in the morning before the bars opened. Who, now that I thought about it, was basically my only...friend.

It was time to start the all-important gathering my mental reserves for the day ahead, and pleading, begging, beseeching the master of the universe for a crumb of help, I shifted now to grope my right jacket pocket. My fingers touched cellophane...please, please...flattened cardboard...fuck...NO!! was it empty?...a bulge, oh thank you, thank you, thank you: I had cigarettes. Not many, but three or four crammed into a corner of the squished-up pack, I could tell by the feel, enough to at least launch me on the task at hand. I smoothed one out, fished a pack of matches from under the pillow, and lit up, inhaling deeply. My world was a constant series of bargains, outwittings, maneuverings, cliff-hanging near-misses, rewards and punishments, which was why I often experienced entire odysseys without ever leaving my bed.

Fortified by half-a-Winston's worth of nicotine, I prepared for the next moment of truth. Most people my age--33--had wallets, but when my waitressing shift was over for the night I simply crammed bills

and change willy-nilly into my pockets. In fact, I lived in a kind of Rip Van Winkle-like coma about many things that seemed to come easily to normal people: health insurance, checkbooks, wristwatches--these were concepts far beyond my ken. I told myself I was embracing a kind of bare-bones purity and though this was true enough in its way it wasn't because of any philosophical convictions: it was because I was such a terrible drunk I didn't have any choice.

I patted myself down, heart sinking at each successively empty pocket. I'd blown it all--62 bucks and change as I remembered--somewhere between the time I'd gotten out of work the night before and whenever I'd rolled home. Oh wait, here was a tiny wadded up... I regarded my entire life's savings, lying therein my hand: three one-dollar bills, a nickel and two pennies. Enough for a pint of vodka at Macy's Liquor and subway fare. The dreaded, hateful, satanic subway fare. Because this was the hell of it--the oppressive, shrieking, unbearable hell: I had to work again. My head had cleared enough to remember I was on for the lunch shift at Jimbo's Seafood Shack--the restaurant where, one more time, I'd somehow managed to find a job.

I sank back on the pillow and lit another cigarette, gazing dully into the middle distance. Through the window was the Lindemann Mental Health Clinic, a glorified nuthouse, and beyond that, my alma mater: Suffolk Law. I could hardly believe it myself, it was such a cosmic joke, but it was true: I was technically a lawyer. I say technically because although I had managed to graduate with honors and pass the Massachusetts bar a year--whoops, two years--ago, I had never, for obvious reasons, actually worked for so much as a day as a lawyer. Naturally this filled me with massive amounts of shame, guilt and remorse, and yet--I had to admit it, in some little corner of my psyche, I was also perversely proud. Not that I was a lawyer, but that I was throwing away something other people would have given their right arm for. One of my most cherished notions, all evidence to the contrary, was that I was...unique somehow. Special. A lawyer spending her mornings at JT's Place: how many people could say they'd had that experience? In my saner moments I realized this was unique, though perhaps not something of which to be proud.

Head pounding, I sat up, got my feet on the floor, and with some difficulty made my way to the “desk”—a plate glass window stolen from a construction site balanced on two stack of milk crates. Overflowing ashtrays, beetle-black rotary phone half-buried under old newspapers and—oh praise be, oh thank you, thank you, a million times thank you—not one, but two half-glasses of flat, stale, warm beer. I brought one back to bed, pulled the mangy blanket up to my chin, and took a sip. God knew I needed a bracer, for the truly gruesome time was upon me now, the time of reckoning that occurred each morning: the time when I attempted to piece together what had happened the night before. Apparently there’d been people up here: there were Camels and Kools stamped out on the saucer I was using, a roach on the dresser; plus I would never have brought beer home myself: I always stayed at the bars till last call and the stores were always closed by then, plus I was too cheap and had no foresight, especially at that hour. So at any rate okay, let’s see...I’d taken a cab to Misty’s...Kieran was tending bar...Dot was there...Patrick had bought us a couple of rounds...Tommy...I stopped dead; cigarette, halfway to mouth, in hand. A blood-curdling memory had suddenly dredged itself up from my subconscious: I had made out with Tommy. I had MADE OUT WITH FUCKING TOMMY AT THE BAR. Oh God. Oh no. Tommy not only had an abysmally low IQ, he was also friends with Kieran, who I had a huge crush on and who, even though he wasn’t in the least bit interested in me, would know I was a total whore (like he didn’t already, as I’d already slept with all his other friends) and be jealous. What could I possibly have been thinking? No, I totally remembered now, it was right after I’d done those lines in the bathroom and then Dot and I gone out back and smoked a joint. After that, things got very fuzzy. I had a vague impression that Dot might have stayed with me till the end but I had no idea what time I’d left, how I’d gotten home, who’d been up here, and how long he, she, or they had stayed. Another night, added to the hundreds that had gone before, shrouded in mystery. Really, when you thought about it, it was creepy. My own life was a secret to me.

God did I feel like shit, I thought, sinking face down in despair and pulling the blankets over my head like a shroud. I probably needed at the very least a blood transfusion and probably several IV

lines of vitamins, liquids and nutrients. I could hardly believe I had to work, never mind come home afterwards, get dressed and go up to New Hampshire to see my family. I counted backward from 10, willed myself to spring up, catapulted back to the desk, and dialled the operator to see what time it was: oh Jesus, nine twenty, I had to get my ass in gear. I dragged myself down the hall to the shower, dragged back, yanked my dirty uniform out of the plastic bag into which I'd stuffed it before hitting the bars, gave it a shake, and pulled it on: a rayon dress of dark brown and white that smelled like week-old French fries. A spray of Chamade under each pit--in spite of everything, for some reason I always had good perfume; a comb through my wet hair; and I was ready. I took a quick look in the mirror: Oh hideous, HIDEOUS! Why was I so UGLY? And FAT? Book for the subway, check; meager stash of money, check; key, check. I padlocked the door behind me.

There was no easy way to get to Jimbo's: you had to take the Green Line to the Red Line and even from there it was a walk. Down on the street, I headed down the gloom of Causeway toward North Station, turned down Canal and ducked into Macy's, which had a discount bin filled with stuff that was barely a cut above pruno but dirt cheap. I'd started off drinking after work, then before work, then during work: now I just drank all the time. \$2.89 pint of moldy potato mash in hand, I walked across to the subway station and, on the platform, took a nip--it tasted like nail polish remover. When the train pulled in, I found a seat and opened The Habit of Being: the collected letters of Flannery O'Connor. Books were the closest thing I had to God--even at my worst I still made a pilgrimage to the public library every week or so for a fresh stack--and O'Connor was my heroine, literary and otherwise. I had read her short stories so many Times that some of her characters--Asbury from "The Enduring Chill," Mr. Head from "The Artificial Nigger"--were more real to me than people I had actually met, and though I could not imagine being a Catholic, or understanding the Gospels, or living like a monk on a Georgia dairy farm the way she had, her fierce faith and unwavering convictions inspired in me the utmost respect. "...My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil," she had written somewhere and, though I wasn't quite sure what she'd meant, the

words stirred me; struck some chord in a place deeper than I could reach.

I took another nip as the car lurched to a stop and glanced down at a letter dated 1958: "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." Grace again...what was that?...something that happened in stories, to other people...and as for change, nothing had changed for me in years. I'd come to such a low pass I'd even prayed while I was in Nashville--not that it had worked. Still, I had to admire O'Connor's faith, which had sustained her through, among other things, a long seige of lupus, the painful, debilitating illness from which she had died at 39. That was one thing we had in common. She'd been sick, too.

I got off at South Station, walked down Atlantic to Northern Avenue and turned down what struck me thus far as a sadistically long wharf. Naturally, Jimbo's was at the very far end of it; a few more feet and it would have been in the water. It was a family restaurant: captain's chairs, the smell of chowder, plate glass windows with a view of the harbor. I hadn't been working there long enough to know anybody so in the ladies' locker room, I said hey to the other gals, then went into a bathroom stall with my purse and guzzled enough vodka to get me through punching in, setting up my station and the depressing sight, as eleven o'clock neared, of the customers outside the door waiting to get in, many of whom included families with young children. I had never been crazy about children--they made me nervous and I was jealous of them somehow, probably because they got so much attention--and they were heinous to wait on: the high chair, the tray filled with chewed-up food, the crap on the rug after they left. Plus children don't tip. For the next four hours I hustled plates of fish 'n' chips and fried clams, my hands smeared with ketchup, my shoes splashed with coffee, my head pulsing cruelly, as if protesting the residue of nicotine, stale vodka, and tormented sleep deprivation that coursed through every vein. The manager walked by at one point, snapping his fingers at me as if I were a coolie, and when I snuck out back for a cigarette around two the dishwashers, out for their own smoke, gave me a dirty look, got up en masse from their perch near the dumpsters, and moved. It was a beautiful fall day, the sun sparkling on the whitecaps, but to say nature had ceased to

move me would have been something of an understatement. Somewhere, in another world, gay groups of people were driving through the mountains exclaiming at the autumn foliage, planning meals together, having babies. *I am so tired*, I thought as I wedged the last of my Winston between the slats of the wharf and pushed it into the oily water below, *I am so, so tired*. Waves splashed forlornly against the barnacled pilings, and the beaks of the seagulls, tearing off pieces of rotting fish, were a deep buttery yellow, like yellow ivory.

Back inside, the last of the lunch crowd was straggling out as I restocked my station. I punched out, walked back up the sadistically long wharf, took the Red Line to the Green Line to Haymarket and, before hitting home, topped off at the Stone Lounge. Sitting in a corner sipping Miller Lites--an occasional calorie-counting measure designed to counteract the effects of decades of no exercise and a daily booze intake equivalent to several meals--I smoked, brooded, and tried to garner my strength for the night ahead. Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" drifted to mind: "About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters..." Dimly realizing I was withstanding a degree of pain normal people didn't--or wouldn't--suffering was a subject I contemplated frequently. Was I being groomed for some special mission? What possible purpose could an existence like mine serve? When I wasn't drinking in crappy bars, I was home by myself reading: a life that was achingly lonely, and yet perversely designed to prevent anybody from ever getting close enough to really know me. Then again, I hardly knew myself, and the thought of having to take a good hard look was one of the main reasons I'd stayed lost in an alcoholic daze for the last twenty years. Sin is the failure to grow, I'd read somewhere. If that were true, I thought as I stood up to leave and threw down a few bucks for the bartender, I'd been in a state of sin since I was 13.

No Time to worry about that now, though; I had to go home and get ready for tonight. I passed the Government Square parking garage, scurried across the entrance to the Southeast Expressway, and hustled down Merrimac Street. On the curb in front of 121, some of my neighbors were passing around a pint, waiting for the mailman to bring their welfare checks. Upstairs, I hauled an old bag of ice out of the freezer, banged it against the floorboards till a chunk broke off,

threw it in a beer mug with what was left of my vodka, changed into my one decent pair of jeans and put on my favorite Dolly Parton album. I'd always had one foot in this world and one foot in a fantasy world, plus my heart had been hemorrhaging blood since the day I'd discovered boys, so country western right up my alley: a source of comfort, relief, camaraderie. Late at night I often stood in front of the mirror and pretended I was Patsy Cline, and as Dolly segued into one of my favorites--"It's All Wrong, but It's All Right"--I lit another cigarette and took a huge swallow, letting the vodka slide voluptuously down my throat. For a minute the old familiar feeling--life, light, hope--returned. Everything was all right--or would be soon. Everyone hits a bad patch now and again.

By the time Dan pulled up outside, honking his horn, I'd reached the semi-anaesthetized "life of the party" state I'd been aiming for since that morning. "Be right down," I yelled out the window, and poured the rest of my drink into a plastic travel mug for the ride. I took the four flights at a sprint, ice cubes sloshing. Just as I reached the door I stopped dead in my tracks.

Oh fuck, I thought. I'd forgotten to buy my father a present.