

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Tim Finnegan lived in Walkin Street  
A gentleman Irish mighty odd  
He had a brogue so rich and sweet  
And to rise in the world he carried a hod  
Well, Tim had a bit of a tipplin' way  
With the love of the liquor he was born  
And to send him on his way each day  
He'd a drop of the craythur ev'ry morn

*Johnny Barleycorn*

Johnny wakes with the first light of a gray dawn. The table lamp is still on, the Madonna presiding solemnly over the scene. The small room is close now, and the stale air heavy with the smell of sex mixed with Mary's subtle perfume. He slips carefully from between the sheets and quickly dresses, his eyes never leaving her face as she goes on sleeping peacefully, impressing an image in his mind for all time: the healthy flush of color in her cheek, her long, long eyelashes, the freckles on her nose, mouth slightly open showing the tip of a pure white tooth, the sweet breath coming regularly on the pillow. Resisting the temptation to plant a kiss on her cheek, Johnny slips out the door. On the landing he tries the door on the right and finds it exits down to the street. He hurries back to his hotel, showers and changes clothes, and heads for the library.

Johnny works the morning away, mechanically thumbing through books, filling up and filing away note cards for future reference. But his mind is elsewhere. Every few minutes his pen stops and he looks up, staring off into space, his thoughts flying back to that little room above the pub, drawn as if by a siren song to the strange, beautiful creature who bewitched him. He sits at a long table with school kids doing study projects and homeless alcoholics reading the free newspapers, and he makes love to her again and again. He sees her exquisite face and hears her musical voice, feels her warm flesh pressed to his, smells that heady combination of French perfume and the fragrant, musky secretions of a young woman making love. And it's all so real, almost as if she has added a new dimension to him.

At eleven-thirty, Johnny leaves the library, has a quick bacon sandwich and cup of tea at a small lunchroom, then heads for Shandon Church. The events of the past twenty-four hours have fired him up so much he can't wait to get the meeting out of the way to head back and see Mary.

He soon finds himself at the head of the table in a smoky church basement, once more being introduced to a collection of

*Johnny Barleycorn*

Cork alcoholics. He recognizes several people from last night's meeting.

"I heard Johnny's message yestiddy on Saint Patrick's Hill," says Michael, "an' I t'ink you're gonna 'preciate it as much as I did. So, I'll jes' turn da meetin' over ta ye, Johnny."

"Thank you, Michael," says Johnny, looking around the table. "I seem to find myself on a speaking marathon in Cork, since with this meeting and the one tonight I'll have spoken three times in twenty-four hours. I've no problem with that, but since I see some faces here from last night's meeting, it'll be less boring for you if I pick up where I left off. So the drunkalogue continues."

This discourse is greeted with smiles and chuckles around the room, and Johnny launches into the second part of his story. By way of introduction, he quickly relates how he began drinking as an adolescent and how he became an "instant" alcoholic, with all the problems related to intoxication, blackouts, sickness and troubles with the police right from the beginning. In a few minutes he takes them up to the incident at the Tarrytown Country Club, remarking: "That was a blackout I'll remember the rest of my life," and provoking their laughter again. Soon each member of the group is involved in Johnny's story in his own way, more or less identifying with the drunken escapades, the problems and frustrations, the fears and resentments, the misery and suffering and hopelessness of the drinking alcoholic. And even though most of the people had never seen the man until a few minutes ago, and even though he comes from a foreign country and speaks their language with a strange accent, from his story they know that he is one of them and that they have more in common than not. Johnny senses this and he is at ease as he sits back and continues his tale. And, here again, the listeners get the standard account while the unexpurgated version unrolls in his mind. And it goes like this:

So that experience at the Tarrytown Country Club gave me some bad moments, but, as always, time passes and attenuates, and when I got back to school a few weeks later I had put all thought of it out of my head, and was even looking around to see if I could find a part-time job to make my newly acquired

*Johnny Barleycorn*

bartending talents pay off. Since Madison is a big drinking town and loaded with taverns, it wasn't long before I found just what I was looking for. The name of the place was the Rainbow Lounge, and it was located just off Capitol Square. It was owned by two partners, Dan and Harry, and as cocktail lounges go, it was pretty much second-class. Whereas just down the street the Senate Lounge welcomed state legislators and other notable persons, the Rainbow tended to get people like the construction workers building the new Holiday Inn. In fact, after a busy Saturday night I was more than likely to be mopping blood up off the floors after the place closed. Fistfights and whores and loud drunks were never tolerated in the Senate Lounge. They all came over to the Rainbow.

My bosses found these people amusing, and it was a rare occasion when anyone was asked to leave. For example, I once witnessed a bloody fistfight between two burly young construction workers that went on for nearly an hour, and although I've never had a weak stomach, at the end I couldn't bear to watch anymore. They fought in mad flurries, of course, because a serious, bare-fisted fight like that one would ordinarily last only a few seconds or minutes. But they'd stop for a time and drift off to different ends of the bar to drink a beer and confer with friends and supporters. Other clients would gingerly walk through the slippery blood on their way back to the toilet. And then before long the shouting and swearing would begin again and they'd be back at each other, the sickening loud thuds of fist against face resounding once more. Harry and I were on duty that evening. I was taking care of the bar and Harry was sitting on a stool out front, sipping a brandy and water and watching the fight as if it were on television. He was drunk, of course, as both of my bosses were alcoholics and the only time I ever saw them with a semblance of sobriety was early in the morning and even then only rarely. Harry had that funny little smile on his pudgy face that he wore whenever he was tight. "Ooooo," he'd say, eyes flashing, cringing at the sharp sound of a telling blow, "he got him a good one! Oh my!" he'd remark, putting a hand to his cheek and turning to me in mock horror, "lookadat!"

*Johnny Barleycorn*

After two ashtrays and half a dozen glasses were smashed and a pinball machine put out of order, we decided to try to break it up. Happily, this coincided with the conviction of one of the participants that he'd better go to the hospital before irreversible damage was done. He left, and the fight was finished.

There were two other part-time bartenders at the Rainbow: Little Ben and Red. Ben was an electrician, moonlighting nights to make alimony payments. He also had a drinking problem. So, of the five people who could be found behind the bar in that place, four of them, myself included, were alcoholic. Red was the only normal drinker in the bunch. He was also very dull.

Dan and I were the worst at that time. The others more or less controlled their drinking while they were working, but Dan and I would sometimes get falling down drunk on the job. He was an ageing playboy-type, thrice divorced, and he stayed stiff literally the day long. Most of the time the telephone was glued to his ear as he arranged things with girls all over the state, and I saw disgusted customers get up and walk out after sitting there for ten minutes waiting for service and listening to Dan's drunken cooing into the telephone.

The extent of Dan's problem became clear to me a few days after I had begun working for them. I arrived one evening just before nine o'clock to relieve him, and found him standing in front of one of the cash registers. His handsome-gone-to-seed face was heavy and flushed, and bore a bewildered look. He was holding a handful of change about breast high, swaying back and forth. I quickly understood that he was too drunk to ring up the cash register.

Lawrence, a hotel doorman who worked down the street and was friendly with both bosses, jumped off his stool to greet me. He took my arm, a worried look on his face, and whispered: "Ya better do somethin', he's givin' the joint away!"

I doffed my coat and went behind the bar. Dan gave me a crooked smile, dumped the handful of change in my hand, and staggered out to the front lounge where he stretched out on a banquette and fell asleep. I pitched in and had the bar shaped up

*Johnny Barleycorn*

in no time, feeling all the same pretty self-righteous about the fact that I was in control and my boss was passed out drunk in the front lounge.

The other owner, Harry, by contrast, was much more prudent in his alcohol abuse; in fact, there were times when I suspected that he was pretending to be drunk when he was actually only a little high. He was a family man with a fairly stable marriage and several children, a relatively rare bird in the jungle of bars and cocktail lounges. He also complained the most about the losses engendered by the bartenders drinking on duty, buying friends drinks and so forth. He even hinted around about stealing, but never accused anyone directly.

I can't speak for the others but I was stealing regularly in a variety of ways. Some nights when I closed up I'd help myself to an extra five or ten dollars from the cash register and a half pint of brandy to take home for a nightcap. I also never charged my friends for their drinks, never paid for the countless drinks I personally took in the place, or for the hot beef sandwiches, cigarettes, rubbers or whatever; in fact, so little attention was paid to what went into and came out of the till that they never even bothered to check it out on a daily basis, as is standard practice in any retail business.

Another aspect of this job was the women. Low-class cocktail lounges attract a certain breed of lonely women, including alcoholics, sluts, professional whores and crazies. Even an occasional ageing maiden or desperate divorcee would come in, hoping to pick a diamond out of the rough crowd that frequented the Rainbow. I discovered quickly that a bartender is in a privileged position when it comes to making conquests, and practically every night I worked I took home a different woman, although I wouldn't have wanted to introduce any of them to my mother. In short, this job was a complete debauch, literally paradise for an alcoholic, and I was totally happy with it most of the time.

One drawback was that I was in my last year of university at this time, and a lifestyle like that doesn't mix well with serious studies. Working, drinking and chasing women all night, I found it

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so difficult to go to classes and study during the day that I felt obliged to quit my marvelous job at least three times during the year. But each time I went back after a week or so. It was just not humanly possible for me to pass up all the money, booze and women that the job offered. And even if the bosses were vexed each time I quit, they were happy to take me back. They weren't aware that I was a thief, and I *was* a good bartender. "Best in the West," Dan would say with pride, watching me through bloodshot eyes as I handled a full bar with ease while he sat tranquilly on his stool, sipping a brandy and water, phone glued to his ear.

But, of course, my drinking got progressively worse, and it was while working in the Rainbow lounge that I made my first feeble attempt to get help for my problem. It was the result of a particularly bad bender during which I lost my car for three days. I tramped all over the city trying to discover where I'd left it, and when I did finally find it parked in front of a bar in an obscure part of town, it was plastered with parking tickets. I was enraged by all this inconvenience, and my reaction to that, as to any unpleasant situation, was to get good and drunk.

I wanted company to complain to, so I stopped to see my friend Regina. She was a third-year liberal arts major, a former girlfriend of a close friend of mine. Although nothing serious ever developed between us, we enjoyed each other's company. She was only mildly surprised to see me half drunk on a Wednesday morning, acquainted as she was with my mad ways. I found two beers in her refrigerator and drank them while we chatted, then convinced her to come with me to get some more. She came along, perhaps thinking she had better keep an eye on me. I used to get pretty reckless when a bender progressed beyond the second or third day. I bought a six-pack and we drove around while I babbled on about the senselessness of life. She quoted me Sartre and Camus, and we finally ended up at the zoo. It was a clear March day. The bright sun was melting the snow and the animals were beginning to sniff spring in the air. We stood hand in hand, contemplating the backside of a gigantesque, female Siberian tiger that was sleeping curled up against the front bars of her cage.

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I sucked the foam out of the last can of my six-pack and threw it at the cage to stir up the cat. The can clinked off the bars. She didn't move. This bothered me. I started to clamber over the guardrail. Regina panicked, grabbing my arm and trying to pull me back, pleading with me to stop the insanity. This made me more determined. I broke loose from her and half jumped, half fell over the fence. The tiger didn't move. I picked myself up and staggered boldly up to her cage. She lay there indifferently, facing away from us. Regina was sobbing hysterically, entreating me to stop, sure that she was about to see my head torn off. It was man against beast, as I saw it in my drunken state. The bars were spaced about eight inches apart. A large patch of her thick, amber fur jutted through the bars near her rump. I hauled back and socked her mightily with my fist.

I never would have believed a beast that size could move so fast! All I saw was a whirr of striped fur, a massive red mouth, fantastic white fangs. My world was swallowed up in an ear-rending, cavernous roar, and a sharp blast of moist, foul-smelling hot air. I was stunned by a combination of surprise, fear, and panic so quick and acute that I pissed my pants. Fortunately, I was not beyond reacting, and though at first I was only able to jerk my head back, it was just enough to escape by an inch or so the blur of monstrous, spiked paw that swiped at me through the bars, although I can still feel the rush of wind it created on my face. Regina screamed and fainted into a puddle on the path. I ended up on my back in the snow, staring at the spreading stain in the crotch of my trousers. The tiger trotted over to maul angrily a joint of meat in her washtub-sized bowl.

I quickly regained my senses, being completely sobered up by the fright, and scrambled back over the fence. I helped Regina up out of the puddle. She was shivering and sobbing uncontrollably. A guard was approaching at a fast walk, alerted no doubt by the unusual intensity of the beast's roar. I succeeded in calming Regina a bit as I hustled her towards the exit. Once we were back in the car she became very angry and made me take her home immediately. She never talked to me again.

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I finished the day up by going from tavern to tavern, drinking to forget the morning's madness. I finally passed out at the wheel of my car while waiting for a red light to change. The police soon came by. Fortunately for me, it was St. Patrick's Day and they were both of Irish extraction. (Laughs.) One took me home in the squad while the other followed in my car. I thanked them profusely for their compassion, then flaked out fully clothed on my bed with visions of terrible tigers dancing in my head. Just another day in the life of Johnny Barleycorn.

Well, that was over two decades ago, and I haven't been to a zoo since. But that Siberian tiger is still stalking around there in the back of my brain, and she manifests herself in my dreams at least two or three times a year.

Anyway, that was the incident that made me decide to try to get help. The next morning I was sick and shaking, moaning and morose, and trying to distract myself a little with a cup of black coffee and the "Wisconsin State Journal." Frightening and depressing thoughts of my previous day's folly kept me from concentrating on the newspaper, but while I was perusing the classifieds that magic number seemed to jump out at me. I went to the phone immediately and dialed it.

"C'mon down and see us," the nice man on the other end of the line said.

"I . . . I don't know," I hesitated. "I think maybe I'm too young, really, to be an alcoholic." I was twenty-two at the time.

"Age isn't important," said the man matter-of-factly. "It's not important what you drink, when you drink, how or how much you drink. What's important is what alcohol does to you. Does it make your life unmanageable?"

I really couldn't get honest enough at that time to admit that my life was unmanageable, but of course, it was, and had been for a long time. The problems with the tiger and Tarrytown Country Club were only the latest in a long series of disastrous situations directly linked to my drunken behavior. I told the man on the phone that I'd think about it, and I did, long and hard.

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That same evening, I remember taking a long, soul-searching walk along the lake. I told myself frankly and honestly that I couldn't drink, that it had only caused me trouble and pain since the first time I tried it, that I was bound to end up like all the other sad alcoholics I saw every night at the Rainbow lounge, that I'd never be able to finish college and go on to law school as planned if I didn't stop drinking once and for all. Then and there, with tears running down my cheeks, I made a solemn vow to abstain from alcohol in all its forms for the rest of my life. Oh, I can remember the immense feeling of joy and relief as I walked back to my room. No more blackouts, hangovers or reasons to steal, no more wasting money, trouble with police or wet beds in the morning, no more car accidents, court appearances or other embarrassments – freedom from all that just for giving up drinking! I must have been crazy not to swear off a long time ago !

My vow lasted just nine days. I was tending bar in the afternoon. It was my birthday, and I let the news slip out. Harry insisted on buying me a drink. How could I refuse? Anyway, by then I had seen the impossibility of living a lifetime without alcohol. When Dan came to relieve me that evening at nine, he found me too drunk to ring up the cash register.

I could go on all night about the Rainbow lounge, but I won't. I'll just relate the last debacle I provoked there, because it put a permanent end to my bartending career. You see, as almost all of my undertakings during those drunken years, my job at the Rainbow Lounge finished badly. Just as with the country club, it was almost as if I sabotaged myself to show people what a rotten person I really was. But there I'm getting psychoanalytical, and I promised I wouldn't. Besides, it's a disease, isn't it?

Anyway, it started out as a more or less normal evening. Since it was Friday night and we had a good-size crowd, and since I didn't have classes the next day, I drank a bit more than usual. I was concerned because the end of the school year was near and I was seriously behind in several subjects. There was some danger of flunking one or two classes, in which case I wouldn't graduate. Drinking helped calm my anxiety, but it didn't help me get any studying done.

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About midnight the pressmen appeared. These were the mechanics, maintenance men and printers who insured that the “Wisconsin State Journal” came out every morning. The printing plant was just across the alley from the Rainbow, and they came over every night on what was for them their lunch hour. They were honest working men, as it were, and thus in sharp contrast to the majority of our customers at that time of night. But they smelled strongly of ink and were grimy as coalmen, and wouldn't have been welcomed down at the Senate Lounge. A friendlier bunch of guys there never was, though, and they always brought with them a large stack of the early edition to distribute gratis to the bartenders and late-night clients. They would hurriedly drink three or four beers apiece with much good-humored joking and carrying-on, then disappear just as suddenly to finish their night's work. I remember when they came in that night I was pretty drunked-up, and I gave them one or two free rounds. After they left things quickly quieted down and we closed at one AM as usual. I was trying to keep in mind that I was supposed to open the place up the next morning at nine AM, so I did an extra-quick job of washing up, emptying the ashtrays and so forth. By one-thirty the place was more or less presentable, so I slipped a copy of the newspaper under my arm, tucked a half pint bottle of brandy in my pocket, and locked the door. At the time I was living in an independent room on the top floor of an old house in a quiet neighborhood of Madison. At home I had one last brandy and water, glanced through the paper and went to bed. At eight-fifteen the alarm jarred me awake.

I popped three aspirins and took a quick shower to alleviate some of the pain of my ever-present morning hangover, got dressed and headed downstairs. On the front porch was my landlord's copy of the “Wisconsin State Journal.” It was Saturday's paper, the same one I had upstairs, only a later edition. Fat black headlines of a prominent story on the front page leaped to my eyes: RAINBOW LOUNGE BURNS DOWN.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I felt like I was in some kind of time warp. I picked up the paper, checked the story. How could it be possible? I just locked the door of the place a few hours ago; I went back upstairs and dialed the number. The phone

*Johnny Barleycorn*

rang normally as if nothing was wrong, but then nobody was supposed to be there to answer it at that hour. In fact, *I* was supposed to be there.

I hurried downtown in my car, and as I drove up the street towards the Rainbow, the traces of water and charred wood that were still running down the hill told me that the paper had the story straight. I stopped in front, my stomach sinking as I stared incredulously at the gutted building, the broken windows and blackened masonry.

Dan and Harry had already set up temporary headquarters in the Senate Lounge. Both of them were drunk, sighing and moaning, telephoning to insurance companies, creditors and friends; Dan seemed perturbed to see me, but Harry was philosophical.

“What happened, fer Chrissakes, Harry?!” I pleaded, at the same time pointing at the brandy and water in front of him and signaling to the Senate bartender to bring me one of the same.

“Ya got eyes, haven't ya, Johnny?” Dan put it sharply, picking his drink up off the bar.

Harry held up a hand. “Didn't ya notice anything when ya closed up last night, Johnny?” he asked calmly. “The police say it doesn't look like arson so it must've been electrical or a cigarette butt or something.”

I stood there rubbing my neck, not knowing what to reply. Dan took an angry swallow of his brandy and water.

“Some dumb shit didn't check the ashtrays when he emptied them!” he shot out, glaring at me. “Were you loaded or what?”

My face flushed hot at the accusation. I took a hard pull at my brandy and water, draining the glass.

“No more loaded than *you* are every time *you* close up!” I retorted angrily, slamming my glass on the bar.

Harry jumped off his stool, took a quick drink, then raised his glass in a peace gesture.

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"C'mon you guys," he said in a reconciliatory tone, "arguin' ain't gonna help nothin'." He motioned to the bartender and held up three fingers.

"Let's have a drink," he proposed.

And that, thank God, was the end of my bartending career. In the few weeks that remained until exams, I applied myself rigorously to my studies and so finished the year in good form and graduated on schedule. It didn't occur to me until years later, but drunk as I was when I closed up the place that night, I might have been open to subliminal suggestion, and thus unusually careless with those ashtrays. Subconsciously, I must have realized that the only way I could start studying seriously and graduate was if the Rainbow burned down.

And so I graduated, and left Madison and the ruins of the Rainbow Lounge behind, and went out to the West Coast to law school. But a change of scene didn't really make matters any better, as all of you who have tried a "geographical cure" for your alcoholism surely know. My drinking problem and all the troubles related to it came with me. Naturally, I was more interested in tipping than in Torts and Contracts, so I spent most of my time hanging around in bars.

This was in 1963 and things were starting to brew in California. Young people were turning away from alcohol to more exotic drugs like hashish and LSD, but at the time I was too far gone on the booze to be interested in anything else. So, basically, I did out in California what I would have done anywhere in the world: patronized seedy bars and cocktail lounges, looking for Truth and Beauty in the most unlikely places, finding only falsity and ugliness.

Since Stanford, where I went to law school, was only about thirty miles from San Francisco, I went up there often. I had been mad about Kerouac and Ginsberg for years, so I spent a good deal of time walking the streets of North Beach, hoping to make the acquaintance of some legitimate beatniks.

Late one night, when I was on my way to catch the last bus back to Palo Alto, I spotted an interesting-looking bunch of people

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sitting around on the curb in front of an empty storefront. There were about six or eight scruffy men with beards and berets in the group, and two or three beatnik-type girls. The first time I walked by they paid me no attention, and I noticed a pint bottle of muscatel going around the group. Thinking to ingratiate myself, I bought a gallon jug of muscatel from a nearby all-night liquor store, then sauntered back and asked if anyone would like a slug. With open arms and pats on the back and a lot of hip chatter like “groovy man,” they sucked me in like a web full of starving spiders would welcome a fat fly. The jug made its rounds, I started spouting Sartre and Camus, and here my memory goes blank.

The next morning I woke up groaning in my room back in Palo Alto. I had no idea how the evening had ended. I struggled out of bed, and then, as usual on such mornings, I stumbled around the room in a panic looking for my wallet. It was gone, along with all my money and identification and even my watch. My checkbook lay open on the desk, one check missing. I sat morosely on the bed, too miserable even to cry. Then I noticed an envelope that someone had slipped under my door while I slept. It was an urgent note from the Dean. He wanted to see me right away.

My interview with him only lasted ten minutes. I sat there with my throbbing head hanging in remorse and repentance, tears streaming from my bloodshot eyes, and recounted my misadventure with the beatniks. He forgave me, and bade me go and sin no more.

From what the Dean told me, I reconstructed the evening as follows: the beatniks took my wallet and watch and left me passed out drunk in the gutter. A Good Samaritan taxi-driver came by, noticed that I wasn't dressed like a bum, and helped me into the cab. He took me all the way back to my room, which ran up quite a hefty bill. He waited downstairs while I went up and wrote him a check for the fare. But it was illegible, so he turned it over to the campus police who transmitted it to the Dean. At this point I knew that I was on my way out of law school.

I went downtown and tried to enlist in the Navy. While waiting for an answer I practically quit going to class. I wandered

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around the streets, literally sighing in anguish. My dreams of law school, of California, of a glorious future, had turned to ashes. Up to that point, even after the worst drinking escapades, I had never known such unrelenting mental turmoil, day after day. I didn't want to stay in California, nor did I really want to join the Navy Officer Candidate School. No matter. After two weeks I learned that my application had been rejected. Even the Navy didn't want me. Down I went into the depths of despair.

A few days later Kennedy got assassinated. It was on my laundry day. Everybody in the laundromat was talking about it. I was unbelievably depressed. I bundled the clean laundry on the back of the bike I had borrowed from my landlady's grandson and headed back to my room. I stopped for a beer to lift my spirits and sat in the bar drinking for five and a half hours watching the aftermath of the assassination on TV. By the time I came staggering back out the bicycle was gone, along with every article of clothing I owned, except what I was wearing. I went back in and bought a six-pack for the walk home. That evening I was drunk and desperate, stomping around my room, sobbing and pulling at my hair. Joan Baez was singing "We Shall Overcome" on the radio. I heard a feeble voice crying: "Mr. Barleycorn, Mr. Barleycorn." It was my landlady. The door to her apartment was ajar. I found the old lady on the floor, suffering from a stroke. She asked me to lift her to a sitting position, which I did. She gasped and suddenly stiffened, wetting herself and dying in my arms. I knew it was time to go.

The next morning the landlady's son came to give me notice. I had already packed what few things I had left. He said he was sorry. I said I was sorry. He said she'd adored Kennedy. I said goodbye, then made the rounds of all the bookshops, bars and liquor stores where I was known and cashed checks to raise travel funds. Of course, I had no money in my checking account, and no intention of replenishing it, but that was a minor detail since I wasn't coming back. I went into San Francisco to catch a Greyhound bus back to Chicago. I was hanging around in front of a cheap jewelry store, waiting for my bus to leave. A hard-charging salesman came out and dragged me in. He had to sell me a watch. I needed one. I picked out the best one and gave him a

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bad check for it. On the bus a few hours later it quit working for good. We slid off the road in a snowstorm in the Sierra Nevada and were stuck for several hours. I was half-drunk, half-sick and generally miserable. A little brat in the back had a kazoo and made the most atrocious noise with it for hours on end. His fat ugly mother was much amused by her little prodigy. Finally I exploded in a stream of expletives, shouting at him to shut up. His fat ugly mother laughed at me derisively, as did many others. Soon the whole bus hated me, the drunken crank. I had to spend three days with them around the clock on the trip back to Chicago. It was holy hell.

At this point in the story, Michael clears his throat pointedly, and glancing at him, Johnny realizes he has gone on long enough.

“I see I’ve been rattling on,” he says apologetically, “and I guess my point is clear by now. Alcohol had made my life become not only unmanageable, but also intolerable. Unfortunately, at the time I didn’t get the point, and I was destined to drink for several more years including a disastrous stint in the military that I don’t have time to go into here. Suffice it to say that the next time I called AA I was really ready to stop drinking. I had finally reached my bottom. And going to at least one and sometimes two meetings a day in the beginning, and working the program and sticking with the winners, a day at a time, I haven’t had a drink since, and it has been many years now. I could conclude by saying how wonderful my life is now, but I’ve still got problems, though I have much to be thankful for. Let me say simply that sobriety is its own reward. And those among you who have sobriety will know what I’m talking about. And for anyone new to the program, I hope you’ll stick around to find out what it is, that marvelous thing that keeps us all coming back to these meetings, that great gift we call sobriety.”

Johnny stops, flushed with the effort of his long monologue, looking around the room at the smiling faces.

“T’ank ye, Johnny,” says Michael. “An’ since this is a shortened meetin’ ‘cause most of us hafta get back to work, we won’t be takin’ comments. Will ye lead us in da Lord’s Prayer den ta close da meetin’?”

*Johnny Barleycorn*

Although it's only a short walk to his hotel, Johnny at one point finds himself breaking into a run. Once back in his room he puts away his notebooks, washes his face and brushes his teeth. Then he hurries back towards Shandon Church. His knock on her door goes unanswered, and he sees no sign of her among the few people in her father's pub downstairs, so he heads off walking rapidly to her uncle's place.

The door scrapes open. Johnny walks in. Mary's uncle is behind the bar wiping glasses. Since it's getting on towards teatime, there's only one customer, an old man at the end of the bar nursing a pint of stout.

Johnny approaches the bar. Mr. O'Sullivan drops his towel on a stack of glasses and moves towards the taps to meet him. Johnny notices the man's unsteady gait and glassy eyes, as if he'd already had too much to drink.

"Hello," says Johnny a bit tensely, noting that there is no smile of greeting on the man's flushed face. "I'm looking for Mary, have you seen her?"

"She's here," answers her uncle, his voice heavy with drink. "She's down in the cellar."

"Good," says Johnny, smiling in relief. "I'll . . . uh, I'll have a ginger ale while I'm waiting. Will she be right back up?"

"I kinda doubt it, Mr. Barleycorn," replies the uncle, placing both hands on the bar in front of Johnny and leaning heavily on them. "Y'see I was down dere ta get a case a beer 'bout an hour ago, an' she didna look like she was ready ta come back up. She's bin down dere since 'bout ten o'clock this mornin', ye know," he concludes, sadly shaking his head.

"Where's the cellar?!" demands Johnny, his heart pounding.

The man points a limp finger at a door at the end of the bar. Johnny jumps from his stool and walks quickly to the door. He opens it to reveal a lighted stairway leading down. Cool, musty air moves across his face as he carefully makes his way down the dirty, mossy stone steps. The walls are made of the same stone, glistening with the damp. At the bottom he steps onto a floor

*Johnny Barleycorn*

composed of packed earth. The smell of stale beer is almost overpowering. Kegs of bitter and stout and cases of bottled beer and whiskey are stacked here and there on pallets placed among the cobwebs. A light from an adjacent room reveals a narrow passageway between piles of soda crates. Cautiously, Johnny picks his way through the passage to the doorway then suddenly stops, the sight in the next room freezing him in the frame.

A bare bulb hangs from the low vaulted ceiling, starkly lighting the grotto-like room, barren of any accoutrements except a whiskey case in the middle of the floor on which Mary O'Sullivan is sitting hunched over. She is wearing the same scarlet dress as yesterday; her face is buried in her hands, her hair wild and unkempt. With his mouth gone dry and his palms moist, Johnny slowly edges over to stand in front of her.

"Mary?" he calls softly.

Her hands drop into her lap. She looks up. For one incredible second Johnny thinks that it's not the same person. The face is thin, devoid of color. Stray strands of hair cling to the wet cheeks. The gay sparkle of the green eyes is gone, replaced by a fiery, hateful stare. Involuntarily, Johnny takes a step backward.

"*BLAST YE!!*" she hisses, stamping her foot, her body stiffened. "Fucked me good, didn't ye then, ye *BASTARD!*" she cries, straining as if ready to fly from her seat and tear out his eyes. "Fucked me good an' right in front of the *Virgin*, didn't ye cocksucker! Motherfuckin', sonofabitchin' bastard!! Get out, ye dirty rotten *SHIT!!!*" she screams, dropping her face back into her hands and sobbing.

Mind reeling, limbs trembling, Johnny takes another step backwards. A gentle thought to approach, to comfort and caress her, is quickly erased by the fear of being set upon by a crazed woman with long fingernails. He slowly backs off towards the stairs, step-by-step, speechless, shocked and confused. Her face still hidden in her hands, she rocks back and forth on the box, moaning and sobbing, her thin shoulders racked with shudders. Johnny turns and flees up the stairs.

*Johnny Barleycorn*

Mr. O'Sullivan is waiting on the other side of the door. One look at Johnny's face is enough.

"It's pretty bad, ain't it?" he asks.

"BAD?!" cries Johnny, flushed and shaking, ignoring the presence of the old man at the end of the bar. "Jesus Christ, man!! Why haven't you got that girl hospitalized?! You keep her in the cellar like some wild *animal*?!! She . . . she could *hurt* herself!!"

"Calm down, Mr. Barleycorn," replies the bartender resignedly. "We bin livin' wit' dis fer years, ye know. Y'ever see how people live in psychiatric hospitals here? It ain't pretty, I can tell ye. An' she ain't one a dem crazy ones, anyway, ye know. She jus' has her spells, her ups an' downs. Oh, we stuck her in once years ago, 'cause we had no choice. She cut her wrists that time an' done a good job of it. But dose t'ree months was hell fer her, ye know, an' she never let us fergit it. But she ain't tried to hurt herself since."

He takes a bottle from the bar, pours himself a generous measure of brandy, and tosses it off.

"Anyway" he continues, wiping a few drops of the drink from his mouth with the back of his hand, "we jus' hafta keep an eye on her. T'is a great pity, idinit? She's such a sweet girl, an' beautiful, too!" He puts an arm around Johnny's shoulder.

"Ye look like ye could us a sup, Mr. Barleycorn," he says. "Kin I get ye somethin'?"

*Whiskey* is the word that jumps into Johnny's mind, but he won't let it roll off his tongue. He collapses onto a barstool, taking deep breaths to calm himself. "I . . . I'll take a glass of water," he stammers.

In the moment it takes the bartender to get the water and set the glass down in front of him, Johnny regains some composure.

"Mr. O'Sullivan," he asks with deliberate, measured words, "why the *hell* didn't you warn me about this last night?"

*Johnny Barleycorn*

“Well, in a way I kinda did now, didn't I?” replies the bartender, showing the palms of his hands. “I said she has her ups an' downs, didn't I? Last night she was up. Today she's down.”

“You could have been a bit more explicit,” says Johnny bitterly

“Well, now, dat's a delicate t'ing, ain't it, Mr. Barleycorn? I mean, most of the time the girl is bubblin' over wit' charm, ain't she? You saw dat! An' she ain't had a bad spell fer months. I mean, we're always hopin' fer a permanent cure, ye know. Besides, you seemed like a nice bloke. She likes Americans. She ain't certified, ye know, never has been. She's twenny-four an she's her own woman.”

He pauses to pour another brandy. Johnny sits on the bar stool, biting his thumbnail, trying hard to keep his concentration on the clinical words of the bartender and away from the sad creature in the cellar underfoot, brooding on her box.

“Well,” the bartender continues, “she's bin doin' so good we decided to let her work here ta help me out fer awhile, ye know. I lost me wife not long ago. Ah, life ain't no bed a roses, is it, Mr. Barleycorn? No wonder a man might drink a bit too much from time to time.” He lifts the glass to his lips.

Johnny clears his throat. “When do you think she'll come out of this one?” he asks, his voice still a bit shaky.

“Oh, I'll be surprised if she ain't out of it by this evenin',” he replies. She's got medicine, ye know, only sometimes she don' take it reg'lar. Anyhow, she took her pills an' I'm hopin' she'll come out of it before I hafta tell her folks. Her ma ain't in the best of health either, ye know.”

He takes another sip of brandy. “She gave ye quite a shock, din' she?” he says sympathetically. “I heard it up the stairs. She picks up them words from bein' around pubs all her life, ye know. But we only hear 'em durin' a spell, thank the Lord.”

“Look, Mr. O'Sullivan,” says Johnny, now feeling very weak and nervous. “I . . . I gotta go.” He slips off the stool. “Can I call you later on? You'll keep an eye on her?”

*Johnny Barleycorn*

“Shhure, shhure, Mr. Barleycorn,” he slurs. “Don' worry 'bout nuttin'. I keep an eye on her no matter what, ye know. But," and here he leans over the bar to get closer to Johnny, saying in a low voice, “if yer business in Cork is done . . . Well, if I was you, I'd jus' go along. Ye don' wanna get mixed up in this. Ye don' hafta, ye know.”

“I . . . I'll call you later on,” says Johnny, turning and heading for the door.

For two hours Johnny wanders through the streets of Cork. It's raining again but now the rain doesn't bother him. He stops in St. Mary's Cathedral, one of the rare Catholic cathedrals in a country that is ninety percent Catholic. He strolls around inside, observing disinterestedly the lavish neo-Gothic decoration, pausing a moment to watch a number of women praying before the statue of the Virgin. He feels a vague urge to light a candle and join them. Further along a confessional is in operation; two old women are waiting their turn in line. Johnny sits down to rest in an empty pew, and to observe.

Johnny: Bless me, Father, for I have sinned . . . It's been a long time since my last confession. I . . . I deceived my wife with another woman after thirteen years of faithful marriage.

Priest: Adultery is a very serious sin, my son, much worse than say, masturbatin', or lyin' ta yer ma.

J: I . . . I *love* my wife. We . . . we have two wonderful children and a happy life. I don't know *how* it happened!

P: It's not only God who works in mysterious ways, my son. So does the Devil.

J: The girl was no Devil, Father! She was . . . so sweet and innocent. The whole thing began so innocently!

P: Doesn't it always, then? The Devil is smart, ye know. He'd never manifest himself as he really is, would he? He'd assume some identity completely foreign to our conception of him. Like for instance he'd find some sweet, innocent girl and use her for a tool if she was weak. How old is she, my boy?

J: Twenty-four.

*Johnny Barleycorn*

P: Thank God for *that*, at least!

J: But, I'm old enough to be her father!

P: The heavier is your responsibility in the matter, my friend!

J: And she was a virgin!

P: The hell you say, sir! Well, now, that . . . .

J: And mentally unbalanced!

P: You coward! How can you admit it? An orphan, too, I suppose?

J: Her ma's chronically ill and her pa's a publican!

P: Worse than an orphan! You dastardly fiend!

J: And I lied to her about my wife!

P: Monster! Oh, you Devil!! God help the poor girl and your poor wife! Get the hell out of my confessional, ye cocksucker! Motherfuckin', sonofabitchin' bastard!! Get out, ye dirty rotten *SHIT!!!*

Back out on the street, Johnny stops at a Chinese carryout. He buys sweet and sour shrimp and a double order of rice and heads for the hotel. Once again in the security of his room, he poses the packages on the nightstand and picks up the telephone. "I'd like to call France, please," he says. "Here's the number . . . ."

The connection sounds good. Three distinct rings and then a lively "Allo?"

"Hello, Mary," says Johnny Barleycorn, almost choking on the lump in his throat. "How's everything in Brittany?"

"Hi, Johnny!" she replies in a warm, happy voice. Everything's fine here! How are you?"

"Not so good, Honey Bunny," he answers, voice wavering. "Not so good."

*Johnny Barleycorn*