

MELISSA HARDY

## Rumours of His Death

THE OLD MAN DIED halfway between the Legion on Algonquin Boulevard and the little white house overlooking Gillies Lake where Stanley Callum and his wife Francie had lived for the past forty years—froze to death in the culvert where the old T&NO train tracks used to be before the rail service was lost and the City of Timmins took up the ties and used them to edge municipal flower beds.

“He wasn’t carrying any ID, but, yeah, it’s Mr. C., all right,” Howie Shea, the police officer who had found the bundle of frozen old man half buried in fresh snow, advised the coroner. “I’ve known the family since I was a kid. Hell! He was my Akela when I was a boy scout. Besides, who else would it be? And Mrs. C. did call into the station, saying he hadn’t come home.”

“Still, you’ll have to send one of ‘em down to ID the old man,” the coroner replied. “Standard procedure in these cases. Well, according to my best guesstimate, Howie, the old guy died at 10:30 p.m., give or take a few minutes. No need to be more precise, is there? No foul play suspected?”

Howie shook his head.

“Yeah,” concluded the coroner, throwing a sheet over the stone white corpse. “Poor son of a bitch just had one too many, sat down ... or fell and didn’t get up.”

“How long did he lie there, Howie?” Stanley’s wife, Francie, wanted to know.

“Well, Mrs. C.,” replied the policeman, scratching his head, “witnesses have Mr. C. leaving the Legion just past eight so that

makes it ... 'bout two and a half hours, I'd say." Howie had gone to school with the Callum's oldest boy, Mike; later they had played in a garage band together. Maybe Mike would come up from Toronto for the funeral and the old band could play a few sets in his new basement.

"I wonder," Francie murmured distractedly as she paced up and down the shabby living room, between the brown and yellow tweed couch that had belonged to Stanley's mother so he wouldn't get rid of no matter how lumpy and stained it was and the battered maple coffee table piled high with tabloids: that *National Enquirer* and ...

They were waiting for Father Paul to arrive. Howie had called the rectory for her and let the phone ring and ring—finally the little Filipino priest had answered in his sleep-fuddled, accented English, "Yez.... Who is?" Howie was a little worried about Mrs. C., to tell the truth. No screaming, no hysterical weeping when he told her that they had found Mr. C.'s body in the culvert. Instead, only a kind of dry-eyed flatness. Shock, he supposed. And she was right when she said there really wasn't any point in waking up Joey and Brian at two in the morning, or whenever it was, or their wives or the grandkids. No, nor those of Mr. C.'s siblings with whom he was still on speaking terms. One thing for sure: Mr. C. was as dead as they come; he'd still be dead when the sun inched up over Gillies Lake five hours from now. Still, he ought to get somebody to go down and ID the old man.

"Mrs. C., " he began, "there's something we'll need you to...."

But Francie wasn't listening. "I wonder," she repeated, pulling her worn pink chenille bathrobe tighter around her neck, "if he was afraid."

"Oh, you know Mr. C.!" Howie reminded her. "Weren't afraid of nothing!" The hell with it, he thought. One of the boys can do the ID in the morning. He'd mention it to Father Paul when he arrived.

But that's just not true, Francie thought, sinking down on the decrepit sofa, fumbling in the pocket of her bathrobe for her pack of cigarettes. He was afraid of so much. Afraid of what people thought of him. Afraid of losing, of giving in. Afraid somebody might spot a weakness in his Tough Guy armour.

"He was tough, all right," Francie conceded, locating the pack of DuMaurier Lights. She extracted one, laying the pack on the coffee table, and lit it, her fingers trembling like they always

did now, just a little, her heart fluttering. How could she expect Howie to understand? He was just a fidgety little middle-aged boy in a policeman's uniform, passing his billed policeman's cap from hand to hand like it was a hot potato, not wanting to replace it on his head for fear of being disrespectful, but not wanting to set it down either. He would much rather be out cruising in his fancy car with its siren and its radar device than keeping watch with his old friend's mother in the wee hours of the morning. Why, even now, he could be checking for fights in the bars or the 101 for errant moose—exciting work, manly duties. He carried a gun. He could be pointing it at someone and saying, "Drop the knife or I'll shoot!" Poor Howie! "As soon as Father Paul comes, you can go," she told him a second time. "But, for now, I can't be alone."

"You shouldn't be alone at a time like this," Howie agreed.

"I'm frightened, you see," she explained.

"That's natural," Howie reassured her.

"No," she contradicted him, "It's silly. The truth is: I'm afraid of Stanley. That he'll come back and scare me. He always used to do that, you know? Pop out from behind things."

"He was a great kidder!" remembered Howie. "But, to tell you the truth, Mrs. C., I don't think he's going anywhere."

"I mean: his *ghost*, Howie," Francie clarified. "It's his *ghost* I'm scared of."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about no ghosts," Howie assured her. "Except, of course, the Holy Ghost.... Well, speak of the devil!" For a knock had sounded at the door. The doorknob rattled tentatively.

"That'll be Father Paul," Howie suggested, brightening visibly.

Francie stiffened, then, turning, ground out her cigarette in an ashtray on the coffee table, and stood, gathering her robe more tightly around her and patting her curly gray hair into place.

"Let him in," she instructed Howie.

The reason Stanley had been at the Legion in the first place (apart from the fact that he practically lived at the Legion and had since his retirement) was that he was on the decorating committee. The Legion's annual St. Patrick's Day dance was that Friday night, and he and his fellow committee members had come in on the Wednesday night to "tart up the joint," as Stanley put it. From six thirty on, right after supper, he was creaking up rickety ladders

with his bad knees to staple green streamers to the water-stained ceiling tiles along with clusters of green and white balloons, while other old men with big bellies struggled to tape cutouts of leprechauns and shamrocks and pots of green gold from the Dollar Store to the walls. This was always a frustrating job—the porous concrete blocks had absorbed so much cigarette smoke over the years that they were coated in a gummy film to which tape didn't often stick or, if it did, not for long.

Of course Stanley had been drinking since who knows when, probably the morning if the last day of his life had been at all typical. "Is it noon somewhere in the world?" he would ask about ten in the morning. (He would ask himself, if need be, if nobody else was around.) Then, when the answer came back in the affirmative: "Well, then, it's time for a beer!" However, Stanley always drank more when he was at the Legion and mixed more too: draught, shooters, moose milk.... "The way to get a job done is to roll up your sleeves, pour down a pint, and have at her," was how Stanley defined his *modus operandi* and he believed in the efficacy of remaining well lubricated for most activities.

The only drawback to this approach was that the more he drank (and the more hard liquor he imbibed), the more likely he was to end up picking a fight. And that was exactly what happened the night of his death: he got into a barking and finger jabbing match with Bert Meadows and Bill Smiley, two of the Top Brass on the Board who had stopped off to see how the decorating was coming.

"It's not clear what they were fighting about," Howie reported to his superior. "However, from what I could piece together from the witness statements, Mr. C. thought Bert looked at him funny and then Bill came out some sort of snide remark about the balloons."

Stanley always ended up at loggerheads with the guys who had run the Legion over the past decade; before '85, it had been better. He didn't like the way they did things and said so. Didn't like their attitude, how they thought they were so important. Better than him. The fact was (and Stanley would admit this to no one), he would have liked to be on the Board himself. However, he knew full well that it would be a cold day in hell that he got elected as a Director on the Board. He had three strikes against him ... and that was just for starters:

One: he had been born in '31, too young to fight in World War II and, though he had served in the Reserve, he had never seen actual combat.

Two: not a whole lot of miners made it up the big ladder and hadn't Stanley been a miner all his life ... and his father before him?

Three: Francie. Or Marie Françoise Gauthier, as she had been christened. "Frenchie," as his mother had disdainfully referred to her behind her back, though she was careful to get on with the francophone from Cobalt. Looking back on his decision to marry Francie, Stanley had to shake his head. How could he have married a Frog—granted, Francie had been quite a looker at the time with her curly dark hair and those Ann Miller legs. But stupid?

The upshot of it all this was those guys on the Board thought they were better than Stanley with their war records and their white collar jobs and their Anglo wives. They looked down on him. And, even though that really pissed him off, really burned his butt, still, year after year, he put in his name for the decorating committee and, year after year, the Board named him to it. After all, Stanley was a hard worker; reliable. You could always count on him to pitch in and get the job done on time and right. That was worth putting up with his being tetchy and loud, particularly given all the lazy sons of a gun who volunteered for committee work, then either didn't show up for work or spent the time shooting darts and blowing the breeze.

"Please, Father, sit down.... No, not there," as the little man headed for the creaky lazy boy with the split orange Naugahyde. "The mechanism's broke. You can sit bolt upright or flat out, but nothing in between. The kids gave it to Stanley fifteen years ago. Father's Day present. Of course he won't throw it out." She paused. "Wouldn't," she corrected herself. "In spite of the way he acted, he was ... well, sentimental."

"I never met your husband," Father Paul observed, blinking sleepily at her. "Why was that?" How young he looked, Francie thought, not for the first time. Like one of those children you see on TV, living shoeless, in poverty in some third-world country and, if only you pledge \$5 a month to their support, you can save them. Big brown eyes, skin the colour of a Tim Horton's double double, hairless as one of those teacup Chihuahuas in the back of the magazines and his clothes hung on him, his priest's white collar....

As if he was playing dress-up. How old was he, anyway? Was it Sophia Georgopoulos who had mentioned that he would turn twenty-seven this Easter? He didn't look a day over fourteen.

"Stanley wasn't Catholic," Francie informed the priest, lowering herself carefully down onto the couch again, as far away from the diminutive Filipino as its length would permit, and, wiggling backwards, wedged her bottom into the couch's corner. "He was raised an Anglican but, the truth was, Father, he never went to church all the time I knew him." She reached for the pack of cigarettes on the coffee table, remembering, as she did, that she had been trying to cut back. "I shouldn't smoke so much," she said. "My parents both died of cancer and my brothers and sisters. Not a one of them lived to see their sixty-fifth birthday." Extracting a cigarette from the pack, she lit it. Inhaled. "I'm sixty-two," she informed him.

"So your husband was ... would you call him an agnostic?" Father Paul asked.

Francie blinked. "I don't know," she admitted. "I can tell you one thing: he was an Akela."

"Pardon?" It was Father Paul's turn to blink.

"A scout leader," Francie explained. "For years and years. Long after the boys had grown up and moved away. He had this wolf head stuck on a pike, a real wolf head off a real wolf, and the boys used to dance around it, chanting, 'Akela!' and 'I'll dyb, dyb, dyb! I'll dob, dob, dob!' Beyond that, I can't say. As a woman, I was never allowed to witness these ... rituals."

"'Dyb, dyb, dyb?' 'Dob, dob, dob?'" puzzled Father Paul. "These words are unknown to me."

"He kept the wolf's head down in the basement," Francie continued. "Only, years later, it started to moulder and, one day, when Stanley was away at the Legion, I put it in a garbage bag and carried it down to the dumpster behind the church. He didn't know it was gone for a long time. It was in the basement, after all. But when he discovered that it was missing, he was some angry. Yelled and screamed and blamed me, of course, because he remembered I had complained about it, but I never said a word. I never admitted to getting rid of it. Was that wrong, Father?"

Father Paul shook his head. "You did well to get rid of such a heathenish object, Francie," he assured her. "Particularly since it had gone off."

"What do you think, Father?" Francie asked hesitantly. "Do

you think Stanley was a heathen? A pagan?"

"It certainly sounds that way," Father Paul had to admit.

"Does that mean ... he's going to *hell*?" Francie whispered.

"Oh, Francie!" Father Paul begged off. "It is not up to me to decide where he will go!"

"But ...!"

"I know! I know! In the old days we used to be more certain about it. Good Catholics go here. Bad Catholics go there. As for pagans.... But nowadays we just don't know. We leave it up to God. Why, who knows? There are worse things than dancing around a wolf's head. Perhaps God will take into account the fact that you loved him and that that will serve to buy him a ticket to heaven, after a few years in Purgatory, of course...."

"But that's the problem, Father," Francie cut him off, stubbing her cigarette out in the ash tray.

"What? What's the problem?" Father Paul asked.

"I didn't love Stanley," replied Francie. "I haven't for a long time."

After the angry exchange with the two Directors, Stanley declared in a loud voice that he was leaving, by God, and, as far as he was concerned, "the whole lot of you can go hell in a hand basket and the Legion with you! Not that it's not already going there with the likes of you in charge!" He pulled on his battered skidoo boots, threw on his brown, fibrefill coat, yanked an orange toque down over his ears, thrust his hands into a pair of stained working gloves and stomped out the back door of the Legion into the parking lot and a blowing snowstorm.

"That was the last we saw of him," Bert Meadows remembered.

Stanley did not own a car. He had up until about 2 a.m. on New Year's Eve 1993 when he had managed to wrap it around a utility pole on the way home from a party at the Moneta. The '86 Cutlass was a write-off and they suspended his license for a year. He had never been able to replace the car—too expensive and what was the point? He was retired now and any place he wanted to go was within walking distance: the IGA, the Beer Store, the Hollinger Golf Course, the Legion. Walking was healthier, too. In all kinds of weather. Who cared if it sometimes got so cold that flesh froze on exposure to air and the drifts were waist deep?

(Francie had taken the loss of the car pretty bad, though. "What if I want to go to Zellers?" she complained. "That's way

across the river and half way to Kamiscotia!" But he only grunted and, sure enough, when she wanted to go to Zellers, one of the kids generally came through and took her there, yes and out for a Tim Horton's afterwards. So what right did she have to rag on him for wrecking the car?)

From the Legion there were two ways of getting home: the long way and the short way. The long way was to walk west on Algonquin, hang a right on Spruce, heading north, then, just after the overpass, to hang another right and head east up the hill. Fifteen, twenty minutes, depending on the conditions. Sidewalks or streets the whole way. The short way was as the crow flies, back through the Legion parking lot, over the packed sand-craggy snow banks, down a steep incline to where the railroad tracks used to run, then up a similarly steep hill to just in front of the Anglican church on the corner and in two minutes he was home: never more than ten minutes door to door. Naturally Stanley chose the shorter way.

A tow truck, lit up like a space ship, rumbled noisily up the narrow, steep street, lurching to a stop just this side of the laneway. Its engine rattled, then hissed, before subsiding into silence; its lights flicked off. From where they sat in the living room Francie and Father Paul could hear the truck door squeal open and a foot-fall on the snow-packed laneway.

"Who can that be this time of night?" Francie wondered. Then, clapping her hand over her mouth, "Joey! I forgot he was on pager tonight."

"Your son Joey?" Father Paul asked.

But before Francie could reply in the affirmative, the front door flew open and Joey Callum stepped into the hall, a short stocky man in his mid thirties with a veiny nose wearing a big red coat and a snow-caked rabbit's fur cap. He swallowed, then blinked. "Is it true, Mom?" he asked, his voice cracking as he squeezed the question he had been rehearsing in the cab coming back from the 101 where a moose had totalled a Pontiac LeMans and vice versa. "I was tuned into the police band in the truck.... I thought they said they had found Dad...."

"Oh, yes, Joey, it's true." Francie stood, clutching her robe together at the throat. "He's gone, Joey."

"Dead?" Joey croaked.

Francie nodded. "Do you want a cigarette?" she asked.



"Dad's ... gone?" Joey continued to seek clarification.

"He's gone, Joseph." Father Paul took over. "Passed over."

Joey's florid face crumpled up. "But ... how? Was it a heart attack, like Granddad?"

"He was coming home from the Legion," Father Paul repeated what Howie had told him on the phone. "He must have fallen, twisted an ankle...."

"You don't die of a twisted ankle!"

"He froze to death, Joey," the priest told him. "As far as they know, at any rate. The police. The coroner."

"Oh, I forgot: you quit smoking," Francie murmured, sitting back down on the sofa. "Well, I want a cigarette." She reached once again for the pack on the coffee table.

"But where, Father?" Joey wanted details.

"In the culvert," Father Paul told him. "Out back of the Legion. Down where the railroad tracks were."

"And nobody heard him call for help?" Joey couldn't believe it. He shook his head. "Dad could be pretty loud."

"You could hear him in Schumacher," Francie agreed. "Joey, take off those boots, will you? You're making a puddle on my carpet."

"He was probably unconscious, Joseph," Father Paul suggested.

"Maybe he passed out," Francie speculated. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"Poor Dad. Down in the culvert, yelling his brains out and no one answering." Joey lifted his glasses and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "He must have felt all alone."

"Or unconscious," Francie clearly preferred this theory. "Joey, would you take off those boots? And your coat, son. You must be boiling."

"Nah! Nah!" Joey said. "I'm heading back out."

"You have another page?"

"No," Joey snuffled wetly, tears leaking from his eyes. He hiccuped, then wiped his nose on his coat sleeve. "No, I ... I just ..." Suddenly he lifted his chin and his eyes opened wide. "I know!" he said. "I'll go see Brian."

"Brian?" asked Father Paul.

"Oh, Joey, no! Joey, don't do that! Not Brian!" cried Francie, leaping to her feet and rushing over to where Joey stood in a puddle of water. She clutched his arm. "You're not going to wake up Brian!"

"I'm going to go over there and bang on the door until he wakes up and then I'm going to tell him, 'See! See! What we said would happen *has* happened. Dad is dead and you didn't make your peace with him and now it's too late! Too late!"

"Oh, Joey, no!" Francie pleaded. "You can't do this! Please! Please, please, please, please! It won't do any good. It will only make things worse. Paulette! Paulette will be furious!"

"Paulette?" Father Paul wondered.

"To hell with Paulette (excuse me, Father)!" Joey cried. "I'm going over there and having it out with my brother once and for all!"

"Oh, Joey, you're going to ruin everything!" Francie protested.

"How can I ruin everything when everything's already ruined?" Joey demanded. "You can't stop me, Mom. This time, by God, I'm going to do it!" And with that grabbed his hat and left, banging the arthritic door behind him.

"Oh, my goodness! Oh, my goodness!" Francie fretted, wringing her hands.

Father Paul tugged at her sleeve. "Who's Brian?" he wanted to know.

Three minutes after he had left his parents' home, Joey pulled up in front of a little blue bungalow a block and a half north on Pine Street. This was where Brian lived—Brian, born between Michael and himself, Brian, the undutiful one. His wife Paulette had picked a fight with Francie eight years ago and, since then, she hadn't spoken to either of her inlaws. Neither had Brian or the grandkids. "Paulette.... She'd take a hyper," was how Brian had explained it to his siblings back when the whole thing started. "It's a kind of loyalty test."

"The trouble is," Joey told himself between gritted teeth, "it's never ended. It just goes on and on. And now Dad's dead."

Getting out of the truck, he slammed the cab door behind him (to hell with the neighbours!), lumbered up the walk, clambered up the formed concrete stairs and started pounding on the door with his fist. "Brian!" he yelled. "Brian! Wake up! Wake up, you son-of-a-bitch!"

After a few moments a lamp switched on in the living room, which faced onto the street—Joey could see light between the verticals and hear muffled voices coming from the back of the

house where the bedrooms were. Then the front door opened. Just beyond it stood his brother, rumpled and in a plaid housecoat. "What's going on here?" Brian demanded groggily. "It's the goddamned middle of the night!"

"Well, Brian, it's been a long time!" Joey exclaimed, bouncing from foot to foot to keep warm—it must be 15 below, he thought. Cold enough to freeze a man to death. "What is it now? Eight years?"

"Joey, what's this about?" Brian asked wearily, slumping against the doorframe and closing his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"Grown a bit of a spare tire there, Brother," Joey observed, patting his own through the thick red coat. "Just like me. And there's grey in your moustache. Well, eight years is a long time, after all!"

"What do you want, Joey? Have you been drinking? I've got to be up at six to go to work."

But Joey wasn't about to let him off easy. Not after all these years. "Aren't you going to invite me in, Brian?" he egged him on. "It's a cold night. A man could freeze to death on a night like this."

"No, I'm not going to ask you in," Brian told him. "And you know perfectly well why not. Say your piece and go."

"Who is it, Brian?" Paulette's voice, shrill, from the kitchen.

Brian stiffened. "Shhh! Shhh!" he hissed at Joey.

"Hi, Paulette! It's Joey!" Joey yelled. "Your favourite brother-in-law!"

"Now you've done it!" Brian muttered through clenched teeth. Then, over his shoulder, "Go back to bed, Paulette. I'll deal with this."

Paulette emerged from the kitchen, as stick slender as she had ever been in one of Brian's big T-shirts, dripping blond hair, hands clasped behind her back in a curiously girlish way, but washed-out looking, Joey thought, too pale. Eight years had eroded her fragile good looks until she now looked thin and haggard with her un-made-up face and her hard mouth and her angry eyes. "What do you want, Joey?" she demanded, the Quebecois inflection so like that of Francie's. "Did your mother send you?"

"My mother begged me *not* to come," Joey asserted, pushing past Brian into the living room to confront his sister-in-law. "*Our* mother," he clarified for Brian's sake, turning towards his brother. "Our mother who lives for your phone call, Brian, who cries for hours every Mother's Day because her second son hasn't spoken to her for eight years."

"Mama? Pa?" Krissy, aged eleven, appeared in the kitchen doorway, rubbing her eyes, trailed by her younger brother, who was whimpering and holding onto her arm. "Who's this man and why is everyone yelling?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Joey, pointing to the children. "Our mother who hasn't been allowed to see her own grandchildren grow up! And why, why? Because your wife had a fight with our mother and, you know something, Brian? I don't even know what that fight was about. Nobody knows what that fight was about. Nobody can remember."

"You want to know what that fight was about?" Paulette demanded. "I'll tell you what that fight was about!"

Joey seized Brian by the shoulders. "Dad is dead, Brian! Dead!"

"Dead?" Brian whispered. "Dad's ... dead?"

"Dead as in 'dead!'" Joey clarified. "Dead as in 'd-e-a-d!' He froze to death out back of the Legion. A few hours ago."

"Dead?" Brian repeated, incredulous.

"Well, I, for one, am glad he's dead!" Paulette shrieked. "I'll be glad when *she's* dead too. Now, get out of my house, Joey Callum!" She raised her right hand. In it she held a square cast iron skillet which she had been concealing behind her back all this time. "Leave us alone!" she cried. Then, gripping the handle of the skillet with both hands, she raised it high above her head before bringing it down squarely on top of Joey's.

Joey sat on the edge of the gurney, gripping his head with two hands as though it were a ball which might roll away. "I have such a headache," he told his mother and Father Paul, who had come to the Emergency Room as soon as they received Brenda, the nurse supervisor's call.

"Oh, I wish Brian had stayed!" Francie complained. "I could have at least spoken to him."

But Brian had merely driven his brother (moaning and uttering threats having to do with what he was prepared to do to his sister-in-law when next he encountered her) to the St. Mary's emergency room entrance and, there, thrust him into the arms of the attendant: "Here. You take care of him. What am I, anyway? My brother's keeper?" Then he catapulted back in the rusty old Escort and, after attempting to rev its engine, which only sputtered in response, rattled away into the night, backfiring all the way down the hill and swearing loudly.

"This time I'm pressing charges," Joey informed his mother. "I already had Brenda call up the police station and tell them to send somebody around in the morning."

"This time?" Father Paul interjected. "You mean ... she's hit you with a frying pan before?"

"A baseball bat," Joey corrected him.

"Oh, no, Joey!" Francie cried. "You can't press charges. Brian will never speak to me again if you press charges!"

"Mom, she could have killed me!" Joey countered. "As it is, I probably have a concussion. Hey, Bren', didn't the doctor say I probably had a concussion?" Joey had gone to Timmins High with Brenda; she was married to a bud of his.

"*Might* have a concussion," Brenda clarified, chewing on a pencil as she peered at a form. She was a big girl, crammed into her tight white uniform, with strawberry blonde hair and patchy skin.

"See, I might have a concussion!" Joey rested his case. "It's not bad enough she drives a wedge between a mother and her son, she has to beat up on me? After all, I'm the dutiful son."

"Why don't you sleep on it?" Father Paul suggested helpfully, wishing that he could sleep on something. He had a 6:30 a.m. Mass, which was now (he checked his watch) only two and a half hours away.

"Oh, all right," conceded Joey grumpily. "I'll sleep on it. Hey, Bren', can I go now?"

"Sure," drawled Brenda. "If you experience any double vision or dizziness.... Yadda, yadda, yadda." Her voice trailed off as she continued to frown at her paperwork. Suddenly she looked up. "Hey, Joey!"

"What?"

"I just remembered. Howie told me to tell you you'd better get down to the morgue. To ... uh, *you know*."

"To *what*?"

"Identify your Dad," she whispered. "Howie says somebody has to do it." She turned to Francie and clearing her throat, said, "I'm so sorry, Mrs. C., about Mr. C. He was ... a great kidder."

"He was that," Francie agreed.

"Why can't Howie identify him?" Joey demanded. "I mean ... he has already, hasn't he? Dad was Dad. Who else could he be?"

"There has to be a *formal* identification," Brenda explained. "They won't, you know, release the body until...."

"Nah! Nah!" Joey shook his head. "Not me. I don't want to do it." He looked at Francie.

"Don't look at me," she declared.

Joey turned to the priest. "Father Paul, you do it," he suggested.

"Me?" Father Paul asked.

"Yeah, you. It's your duty as a priest," Joey informed him. "You ID Dad."

"But I've never met your father!" the priest protested.

"He looks just like me ... only about thirty years older," Joey said. "Oh, and his eyes were a funny light blue. Mine are darker, more like Mom's."

"I can't identify someone I've never met!" Father Paul maintained.

"It has to be family," Brenda explained.

"OK! OK!" Joey conceded. "But not tonight. Tomorrow. What's the hurry? He's not going anywhere. What are we going to do? Wake the undertaker? Let the poor guy get some sleep. Besides, my head hurts too much to ID anybody, much less my poor old frozen father." He slid off the gurney onto his feet. "Ouch!" he said, wincing as his head absorbed the jolt. "My truck!" he remembered. "It must still be outside Brian's house."

"Bunny won't expect you home tonight," Francie reminded him. "Why don't you grab a couple of hours sleep at the house? That way I won't have to be alone and Father Paul can go back to the rectory."

"I have an early morning Mass," observed Father Paul, brightening at the prospect of abdicating his priestly duties, at least as regarded the Callum family.

"Sure, that makes sense," agreed Joey. "I'll get the truck in the morning. Brenda, could you call Howie and tell him I'll be down in the a.m.? And would you mind calling us a cab?"

"I'll walk," Father Paul offered, so eager to get away that he was halfway out the door when he added, "The rectory's only two blocks away."

"Thank you, Father!" Francie called after him. To Joey she said, "The first thing I'm going to do is to get rid of that couch!"

Stanley made his slow way home from the Moneta. He was feeling no pain, that is, unless you counted his knees, which ached like a sore tooth, or all the aches and pains that he usually hauled

around with him in the sixty-seven-year-old bag that was his body: that deep throb emanating from the place where his spleen used to be before the accident in the mine when he had fallen two stories and ruptured it; the ache in his wrists from when he had used to frame Hollinger houses, working until sunset after a ten-hour shift underground, so the kids wouldn't have to eat white bread dipped in cocoa every night of the week instead of just the two before payday. He had chronic heartburn from drinking too much, a hacking cough from smoking and a pervasive gut ache; his right shoulder vexed him from all those years he had pitched for the company team, bit like a dog—a torn ligament, the doctor had said—and, of course, there were his knees. He had wrecked them early on, playing hockey in the Junior Bs. He had been good, all right. One of the best. A scout from down south had made him an offer, but his mother had refused. "I won't hear of it, Stanley," she said, and so he had gone to work underground instead. What might his life have been like if he had defied his mother?

"But I would have never done that!" he spoke the words aloud, fondly. He had loved his mother. Still did.

And such a beautiful night, he thought now, casting his eyes heavenwards. A beautiful northern night. They don't have nights like this down south. Alive with stars. The deepest blue imaginable—a blueness on the very edge of blackness. He remembered the couple of times he had visited his son Mikey down in Toronto—the sky was brown down there; like looking up into a mud puddle; not enough stars to shake a stick at. Not like here. Stanley flung his arms out to either side of him, expanded his barrel chest and inhaled deeply. Good air. Clean air. Cold as lake water and as fresh. Not chunky like it was down there, not stewy or smelling of diesel or wet cardboard.

He had nearly forgotten the ugly row with the top brass at the Legion earlier that evening. To think he had almost gone home right after it! But then, just before he had turned the corner onto their street, he had thought better of it and headed to the Moneta instead—a man's club, just what a man needed on a night that had gone off like an old hunk of sausage. A little banter with the buds. A little to and fro. An exchange of insults. A game of darts. A little more draft. Then in came Archie with a whole pile of fish and chips, steaming hot and wrapped in newspaper.... Vinegar all round. I ought to quit the Legion, Stanley thought for perhaps the five-hundredth time. My real friends all go to the Moneta. What do I

need to hang out with those pack of stuck-up vets for anyhow? It's not like I fought in any war or my father either. Both of us too young. Too young—the story of my life, but not any more.

A brisk wind hurried down the street, tumbling garbage before it like a boy will kick a ball, on his way to somewhere else. Stanley shivered and pulled his orange toque down over his ears. 'Course it was cold up north, he conceded. Cold as a witch's white and icy tit. Well, he shrugged, and who cared? Not him. He had a good warm coat. Not like that poor sod he had passed down in the culvert on his way home, just sitting there as the snow piled up around him—now there was a coat that had seen better days! Tattered, the fibrefill coming out of it fistfuls. Not like this coat, which had belonged to his brother Harry before he died—from that new Zellers down at the mall and bought with Zellers points. You should have heard Harry go on about its many virtues.

"I'd get a move on if I were you," Stanley had advised the man in the culvert. "A fella could freeze to death sitting there like that, not moving."

But the old guy had just muttered, "Bugger off," in a thick, whisky voice and waved him away and, being that Stanley wasn't in any Good Samaritan sort of mood at the time, he had just headed uphill and around the corner, figuring the man would move when he was good and ready to—a situation Stanley well understood.

Poor Harry! he thought now, recalling his brother with a pang. The coat was how he remembered his brother, with whom, to be sure, he had fought often and hard—once they hadn't spoken for three years. That was back in the seventies. Damned if he could remember what that had been about. One thing for sure: he would never give Harry's coat up, no matter how awful Francie said it looked, no matter how often she said it made him look like the Good Year Blimp Man, no matter how much she nagged. They'd bury him in it—Harry's coat. Yes and lay him out on Mama's couch.

He turned the corner onto Balsam now. Almost home, he thought, and a good thing too. He was ready for some shut-eye. He wasn't sure what time it was; he'd given up wearing a watch years ago, when he first retired. But he reckoned that it was pretty late all the same. He must have fallen asleep on the old sprung couch in the lounge. When he woke up, everyone was gone and the place was dark. No matter. Being a Member, he had a key; he had let himself out and locked up afterwards.



The good news was that Francie would be asleep when he got home. She wouldn't know that he had been out so late; she would just assume that he had gotten in after her bedtime. Seeing that the woman went to bed at half past nine, it was hard not to come in after her bedtime. And they didn't share a bedroom. Hadn't since Joey married Bunny and left home ten years ago, freeing up the boys' room. She hadn't lost any time moving out. Two days after the wedding, she had redecorated the boy's room in sugar pink—pink everything: chenille bedspread; pink gingham curtains; pink flannel sheets and the single twin bed covered with stuffed animals, just like a little girl's room—and she was gone. "I want some peace and quiet," she told him. What she wanted, he thought, was to be eight years old again: demure little Marie Françoise Gauthier with her whole life ahead of her and all her choices to be made over again. One thing for sure: she wouldn't choose him. And he wouldn't choose her either. He'd take the scout's offer, go south and play hockey. Mama would have gotten over it in time, he thought regretfully—he so rarely allowed himself regret but tonight his defenses were down. I could have gotten tickets for her to watch me at the Maple Leaf Gardens. A train ticket down. I could have put her up in a fancy hotel. She would have been proud. Why hadn't he realised that then and just ... gone? Mike had left. Just walked away. And Francie still loved him. And Brian.... He hadn't even walked away. Just turned his back. And, God knows, Francie still loved him. His mother would have loved him too. He just hadn't known it when he needed to.

Stanley stopped at the corner underneath the street light. The house was lit up like a Christmas tree. His house. Four in the morning and the living room lights were on, the upstairs lights were on, the porch light was one. What the hell is going on? As fast as his crippled knees and his alcohol-fogged mind could accommodate acceleration, he hobbled to the house and, trying the door, found it unlocked.

There were Francie and Joey on the couch, vodka slushes in their hands. Joey held his forehead pressed to his forehead, like an ice pack. His ruddy face was tear-streaked and his nose was running; he appeared either to be crying or having an allergy attack—the latter seemed unlikely given the fact that the ground was still covered with five feet of snow. Francie was curled up on the couch, her feet tucked under her, smoking; her eyes looked glazed and just that little bit crossed which they did just prior to her passing out.

“What’s going on?” he demanded, breathless from his recent exertion, stomping his skidoo boots to shake off the clumped snow. “Has somebody died?”

Francie twitched and turned in his direction. Her eyes struggled to focus, then, a second later, did. She opened her mouth and screamed.