
Opening Extract from...

The Drop

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For Tom and Sarah
Now there was a love story.

Meanwhile, "Black sheep, black sheep!" we cry,
Safe in the inner fold;
And maybe they hear, and wonder why,
And marvel, out in the cold.

—RICHARD BURTON, "BLACK SHEEP"

THE DROP

CHAPTER 1

Animal Rescue

Bob found the dog two days after Christmas, the neighborhood gone quiet in the cold, hungover and gas-bloated. He was coming off his regular four-to-two shift at Cousin Marv's in the Flats, Bob having worked behind the bar for the better part of two decades now. That night, the bar had been quiet. Millie took up her usual corner stool, nursing a Tom Collins and occasionally whispering to herself or pretending to watch the TV, anything to keep from going back to the seniors home on Edison Green. Cousin Marv, himself, made an appearance and hung around. He claimed to be reconciling the receipts, but mostly he sat in a corner booth in the rear, reading his racing form and texting his sister, Dottie.

They probably would have closed up early if Richie Whelan's friends hadn't commandeered the opposite corner of the bar from Millie and spent the night toasting their long-missing, presumed-dead friend.

Ten years ago to the day, Richie Whelan had left Cousin Marv's to score either some weed or some 'ludes (which was a matter of some debate among his friends) and had never been seen again. Left behind a girlfriend, a kid he never saw who lived with her mother in New Hampshire, and a car in the shop waiting on a new spoiler. That's how everyone knew he was dead; Richie never would have left the car behind; he loved that fucking car.

Very few people called Richie Whelan by his given name. Everyone knew him as Glory Days on account he never shut up about the one year he played QB for East Buckingham High. He led them to a 7–6 record that year, which was hardly newsworthy until you looked at their stats before and since.

So here were long-lost-and-presumed-dead Glory Days' buddies in Cousin Marv's Bar that night—Sully, Donnie, Paul, Stevie, Sean, and Jimmy—watching the Celts get dragged up and down the court by the Heat. Bob brought their fifth round to them unasked and on the house as something happened in the game that caused them all to throw up their hands and groan or shout.

"You're too fucking *old*," Sean yelled at the screen.

Paul said, "They're not that old."

"Rondo just blocked LeBron with his fucking walker," Sean said. "Fucking what's-his-name there, Bogans? He's got an endorsement deal with Depends."

Bob dropped off their drinks in front of Jimmy, the school bus driver.

"You got an opinion on this?" Jimmy asked him.

Bob felt his face pinken, as it often did when people looked directly at him in a way that he felt forced to look directly back. "I don't follow basketball."

Sully, who worked a tollbooth on the Pike, said, "I don't know anything you follow, Bob. You like to read? Watch *The Bachelorette*? Hunt the homeless?"

The boys all chuckled and Bob gave them an apologetic smile.

"Drinks're on the house," he said.

He walked away, tuning out the chatter that followed him.

Paul said, "I've seen chicks—reasonably hot ass—try to chat that guy up, they get nothing."

"Maybe he's into dudes," Sully said.

"Guy ain't into anything."

Sean remembered his manners, raised his drink to Bob and then to Cousin Marv. "Thanks, boys."

Marv, behind the bar now, newspaper spread before him, smiled and raised a glass in acknowledgment, then went back to his paper.

The rest of the guys grabbed their drinks and raised them.

Sean said, "Someone going to say something for the kid?"

Sully said, "To Richie 'Glory Days' Whelan, East Bucky High class of '92, and a funny prick. Rest in peace."

The rest of the guys murmured their approval and drank, and Marv came over to Bob as Bob placed the old glasses in the sink. Marv folded up his paper and took in the guys at the other end of the bar.

"You buy them a round?" he asked Bob.

"They're toasting a dead friend."

"Kid's been dead, what, ten years now?" Marv shrugged his way into the leather car coat he always wore, one that had been in style back when the planes hit the towers in New York City, had been out of style by the time the towers fell. "Gotta be a point where you move on, stop scoring free drinks off the corpse."

Bob rinsed a glass before putting it in the dishwasher, said nothing.

Cousin Marv donned his gloves and scarf, glanced down the other end of the bar at Millie. "Speaking of which, we can't keep letting her ride a stool all night then not pay for her drinks."

Bob put another glass on the upper rack. "She doesn't drink much."

Marv leaned in. "When's the last time you charged her for one, though? And after midnight you let her smoke in here—don't think I don't know. It's not a soup kitchen, it's a bar. She pays her tab tonight or she can't come in until she does."

Bob looked at him, spoke low. "Her tab's like a hundred bucks."

"Hundred-forty actually." Marv worked his way out from the bar, stopped at the door. He pointed at all the holiday decorations on the windows and above the bar. "Oh, and, Bob? Take the Christmas shit down. It's the twenty-seventh."

Bob said, "What about Little Christmas?"

Marv stared at him for a bit. "I don't even know what to say to that," he said and left.

After the Celtics game whimpered to an end like the mercy killing of a relative no one was particularly close to, Richie Whelan's friends shoved off, leaving only old Millie and Bob.

Millie let loose a smoker's cough of limitless phlegm and duration while Bob pushed the broom. Millie continued to cough. Just when it seemed she might choke to death, she stopped.

Bob pushed the broom up by her. "You all right?"

Millie waved him off. "Aces. I'll have one more."

Bob came around behind the bar. He couldn't meet her eyes, so he looked at the black rubber floor covering. "I gotta charge you. I'm sorry. And, Mill'?"—Bob felt like shooting himself in the fucking head he was so embarrassed to be a member of the human race right now—"I gotta settle the tab."

"Oh."

Bob didn't look at her right away. "Yeah."

Millie busied herself with the gym bag she carried out with her every night. " 'Course, 'course. You got a business to run. 'Course."

The gym bag was old, the logo on its side faded. She rum-

maged through it. She placed a dollar bill and sixty-two cents on the bar. Rummaged some more, came back with an antique picture frame with no picture in it. She lay it on the bar.

"That's sterling silver from Water Street Jewelers," Millie said. "RFK bought a watch for Ethel there, Bob. That's worth bucks."

Bob said, "You don't keep a picture in there?"

Millie looked off at the clock above the bar. "It faded."

"Of you?" Bob asked.

Millie nodded. "And the kids."

She looked back into her bag, rummaged some more. Bob put an ashtray in front of her. She looked up at him. He wanted to pat her hand—a gesture of comfort, of you-are-not-entirely-alone—but gestures like that were better left to other people, people in the movies, maybe. Every time Bob tried something personal like that, it came off awkward.

So, he turned and made her another drink.

He brought the drink to her. He took the dollar off the bar and turned back toward the register.

Millie said, "No, take the—"

Bob looked back over his shoulder at her. "This'll cover it."

Bob bought his clothes at Target—new T-shirts, jeans, and flannels about every two years; he drove a Chevy Impala he'd had since his father had handed him the keys in 1983, and the speedometer had yet to find the 100K mark because he never drove anywhere; his house was paid for, the property taxes a joke because, shit, who wanted to live here? So if there was one thing

Bob had that few would have guessed he had it was disposable income. He put the dollar bill in the drawer. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a roll of bills, and held it in front of him as he peeled off seven twenties and added them to the drawer.

When he turned back, Millie had swept the change and the picture frame back into her gym bag.

Millie drank and Bob finished cleaning up, came back around the bar as she was rattling the ice cubes in her glass.

"You ever hear of Little Christmas?" he asked her.

" 'Course," she said. "January sixth."

"Nobody remembers it anymore."

"Meant something in my time," she said.

"My old man's too."

Her voice picked up a tone of distracted pity. "Not yours, though."

"Not mine," Bob agreed and felt a trapped bird flutter in his chest, helpless, looking for a way out.

Millie took a huge drag off her cigarette and exhaled with relish. She coughed a few more times and put out her smoke. She put on a raggedy winter coat and ambled to the door. Bob opened it to a light snowfall.

" 'Night, Bob."

"Careful out there," Bob said. "Watch the ice."

This year, the twenty-eighth was trash day in his section of the Flats, and people had long since put their barrels to the

curb for the morning pickup. Bob trekked the sidewalks toward home, noting with a mix of amusement and despair what people threw out. So many toys so quickly broken. So many discards of things that worked perfectly fine but have been designated for replacement. Toasters, TVs, microwaves, stereo equipment, clothing, remote-controlled cars and planes and monster trucks that only require a little glue here, a strip of tape there. And it isn't as if his neighbors are wealthy. Bob can't count how many domestic squabbles over money have kept him up at night, has lost track of all the faces who climb on the subway in the morning and sag with worry, Help Wanted pages clutched in sweaty fists. He stands behind them in line at Cottage Market as they thumb through their food stamps and in the bank as they cash their SSI checks. Some work two jobs, some can only afford housing through Section 8 allowances, and some study the sorrow of their lives at Cousin Marv's, eyes gone far away, fingers clutching their mug handles.

And yet they acquired. They built scaffolds of debt, and just when it seemed the pile would come tumbling down from the weight, they bought a living room set on layaway, tossed it up on top. And as they needed to acquire, they seemed to need to discard in equal or larger measure. There was an almost violent addiction in the piles of trash he saw, the sense it gave him of shitting out food you shouldn't have eaten in the first place.

Bob—excluded from even this ritual by his mark of

loneliness, his inability to draw anyone to him who seemed interested in him beyond five minutes of topic-of-the-day conversation—sometimes gave into the sin of pride on these walks, pride that he himself did not consume recklessly, felt no need to purchase what they demand he purchase on TV and radio and billboards and in magazines and newspapers. It would bring him no closer to what he wanted because all he wanted was to not be alone, but he knew there was no getting rescued from that.

He lived alone in the house he grew up in, and when it seemed likely to swallow him with its smells and memories and dark couches, the attempts he'd made to escape it—through church socials, lodge picnics, and one horrific mixer thrown by a dating service—had only opened the wound farther, left him patching it back up for weeks, cursing himself for hoping. Stupid hope, he'd sometimes whisper to his living room. Stupid, stupid hope.

But it lived in him, nonetheless. Quietly, even hopelessly most times. Hopeless hope, he'd think sometimes and manage a smile, people on the subway wondering what the hell Bob was smiling about. Odd, lonely Bob the bartender. Nice enough guy, can be depended on to help shovel a walk or buy a round, a good guy, but so shy you couldn't hear what he was saying half the time, so you gave up, tossed him a polite nod, and turned to someone else.

Bob knew what they said, and he couldn't blame them. He could step outside himself enough to see what they saw—a

never-was loser, ill at ease in social situations, given to stray nervous tics like blinking too much for no reason and cocking his head at odd angles when he was daydreaming, kinda guy made the other losers look a little brighter in comparison.

"You have so much love in your heart," Father Regan said to Bob the time Bob broke down crying in confession. Father Regan took him back into the sacristy and they shared a couple glasses of the single malt the priest kept tucked away on a closet shelf above the cassocks. "You do, Bob. It's plain for everyone to see. And I can't help but believe some good woman, some woman with faith in God, will see that love and run to it."

How to tell a man of God about the world of man? Bob knew the priest meant well, knew that he was right in theory. But experience had shown Bob that women saw the love in his heart, all right, they just preferred a heart with a more attractive casing around it. And it wasn't just the women, it was *him*. Bob didn't trust himself around breakable things. Hadn't in years.

That night, he paused on the sidewalk, feeling the ink sky above him and the cold in his fingers, and he closed his eyes against the evening.

He was used to it. He was used to it.

It was okay.

You could make a friend of it, as long as you didn't fight it.

With his eyes closed, he heard it—a worn-out keening accompanied by distant scratching and a sharper, metallic rat-

tling. He opened his eyes. A large metal barrel with a heavy lid clamped tight on top. Fifteen feet down the sidewalk on the right. It shook slightly under the yellow glare of the streetlight, its bottom scraping the sidewalk. He stood over it and heard that keening again, the sound of a creature that was one breath away from deciding it was too hard to take the next, and Bob pulled off the lid.

He had to remove some things to get to it—a doorless microwave and five thick Yellow Pages, the oldest dating back to 2005, piled atop some soiled bedding and musty pillows. The dog—either a very small one or else a puppy—was down at the bottom, and it scrunched its head into its midsection when the light hit it. It exhaled a soft chug of a whimper and tightened its body even more, its eyes closed to slits. A scrawny thing. Bob could see its ribs. He could see a big crust of dried blood by its ear. No collar. It was brown with a white snout and paws that seemed far too big for its body.

It let out a sharper whimper when Bob reached down, sank his fingers into the nape of its neck, and lifted it out of its own excrement. Bob didn't know dogs too well, but there was no mistaking this one for anything but a boxer. And definitely a puppy, the wide brown eyes opening and looking into his as he held it up before him.

Somewhere, he was sure, two people made love. A man and a woman. Entwined. Behind one of those shades, oranged with light, that looked down on the street. Bob could feel them in there, naked and blessed. And he stood out here in

the cold with a near-dead dog staring back at him. The icy sidewalk glinted like new marble, and the wind was dark and gray as slush.

"What do you got there?"

Bob turned, looked up and down the sidewalk.

"I'm up here. And you're in my trash."

She stood on the front porch of the three-decker nearest him. She'd turned the porch light on and stood there shivering, her feet bare. She reached into the pocket of her hoodie and came back with a pack of cigarettes. She watched him as she got one going.

"I've got a dog." Bob held it up.

"A *what*?"

"A dog. A puppy. A boxer, I think."

She coughed out some smoke. "Who puts a dog in a barrel?"

"I know," he said. "Right? It's bleeding." He took a step toward her stairs and she backed up.

"Who do you know that I would know?" A city girl, not about to just drop her guard around a stranger.

"I don't know," Bob said. "How about Francie Hedges?"

She shook her head. "You know the Sullivans?"

That wouldn't narrow it down. Not around here. You shook a tree, a Sullivan fell out. Followed by a six-pack most times. "I know a bunch."

This was going nowhere, the puppy looking at him, shaking worse than the girl.

"Hey," she said, "you live in this parish?"

"Next one over." He tilted his head to the left. "Saint Dom's."

"Go to church?"

"Most Sundays."

"So you know Father Pete?"

"Pete Regan," he said, "sure."

She produced a cell phone. "What's your name?"

"Bob," he said. "Bob Saginowski."

She raised her cell phone and took his picture. He hadn't even known it was happening or he at least would have run a hand through his hair.

Bob waited as she stepped back from the light, phone to one ear, finger pressed into the other. He stared at the puppy. The puppy stared back, like, How did I get *here*? Bob touched its nose with his index finger. The puppy blinked its huge eyes. For a moment, Bob couldn't recall his sins.

"That picture just went out," she said from the darkness. "To Father Pete and six other people."

Bob stared into the darkness, said nothing.

"Nadia," the girl said and stepped back into the light. "Bring him up here, Bob."

They washed it in Nadia's sink, dried it off, and brought it to her kitchen table.

Nadia was small. A bumpy rope of a scar ran across the

base of her throat. It was dark red, the smile of a drunk circus clown. She had a tiny moon of a face, savaged by pockmarks, and small, heart-pendant eyes. Shoulders that didn't cut so much as dissolve at the arms. Elbows like flattened beer cans. A yellow bob of hair curled on either side of her oval face. "It's not a boxer." Her eyes glanced off Bob's face before dropping the puppy back onto her kitchen table. "It's an American Staffordshire terrier."

Bob knew he was supposed to understand something in her tone, but he didn't know what that thing was, so he remained silent.

She glanced back up at him after the quiet lasted too long. "A pit bull."

"That's a pit bull?"

She nodded and swabbed the puppy's head wound again. Someone had pummeled it, she'd told Bob. Probably knocked it unconscious, assumed it was dead, and dumped it.

"Why?" Bob said.

She looked at him, her round eyes getting rounder, wider. "Just because." She shrugged, went back to examining the dog. "I worked at Animal Rescue once. You know the place on Shawmut? As a vet tech? Before I decided it wasn't my thing. They're so hard, this breed . . ."

"What?"

"To adopt out," she said. "It's very hard to find them a home."

"I don't know about dogs. I never had a dog. I live alone.

I just was walking by the barrel." Bob found himself beset by a desperate need to explain himself, explain his life. "I'm just not . . ." He could hear the wind outside, black and rattling. Rain or bits of hail spit against the windows. Nadia lifted the puppy's back left paw—the other three paws were brown, but this one was white with peach spots. She dropped the paw as if it were contagious. She went back to the head wound, took a closer look at the right ear, a piece missing from the tip that Bob hadn't noticed until now.

"Well," she said, "he'll live. You're gonna need a crate and food and all sorts of stuff."

"No," Bob said. "You don't understand."

She cocked her head, gave him a look that said she understood perfectly.

"I can't. I just found him. I was gonna give him back."

"To whoever beat him, left him for dead?"

"No, no, like, the authorities."

"That would be Animal Rescue," she said. "After they give the owner seven days to reclaim him, they'll—"

"The guy who beat him? He gets a second chance?"

She gave him a half frown and a nod. "*If* he doesn't take it"—she lifted the puppy's ear, peered in—"chances are this little fella'll be put up for adoption. But it's hard. To find them a home. Pit bulls. More often than not?" She looked at Bob. "More often than not, they're put down."

Bob felt a wave of sadness roll out from her that immediately shamed him. He didn't know how, but he'd caused pain. He'd

put some out into the world. He'd let this girl down. "I . . ." he started. "It's just . . ."

She glanced up at him. "I'm sorry?"

Bob looked at the puppy. Its eyes were droopy from a long day in a barrel and whoever gave it that wound. It had stopped shivering, though.

"You can take it," Bob said. "You used to work there, like you said. You—"

She shook her head. "I can't even take care of myself." She shook her head again. "And I work too much. Crazy hours, too. Unpredictable."

"Can you give me 'til Sunday morning?" Bob wasn't sure how it was the words left his mouth, since he couldn't remember formulating them or even thinking them.

The girl eyed him carefully. "You're not just saying it? 'Cause, I shit you not, he ain't picked up by Sunday noon, he's back out that door."

"Sunday, then." Bob said the words with a conviction he actually felt. "Sunday definitely."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Bob felt crazed. He felt light as a communion wafer. "Yeah."