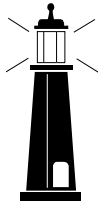




MERCURY CHAMPAGNE

Dan Goodrich



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For Sarah, who dreams with me

Special thanks to my publisher for taking a chance.

Chapter One

The previous morning, Ed Derringer sat in a comfortable office chair in front of the large and immaculately organized desk of his boss Raymond Garner. Raymond was late. Ed checked his watch; it was 8:37 AM. Raymond had asked in an e-mail that Ed meet him in his office at 8:30 AM. When Ed poked his head into the office three minutes early, his boss's quarters were still lit only by the ambient light from a hazy winter sun. Raymond hadn't given Ed any indication why he was requesting the meeting.

Naturally, Ed was worried. He knew that he did a good job—an exceptional job, in fact. Ed found it hard to imagine anyone who could perform the constant and persistent tasks of a data entry clerk as well as he did. A meeting first thing in the morning with the boss, with no prior notice and no knowledge of the subject matter, led Ed to believe this would be his last visit to Raymond Garner's office.

He checked his watch again: 8:38 AM. Ed glanced at the silver-plated picture frame on Raymond's desk. On the frame the legend, "15 Years of Sterling Service," was engraved. Inside the frame was a four-inch by six-inch school photo of Raymond's daughter, a teenager just coming out of that unfortunate stage of adolescence where one grew from an ugly duckling into a swan, or perhaps remained a duck. Ed feared that Raymond's daughter was destined to quack. *Welcome to the pond, my dear. Mind the geese.*

Ed heard the dull click of the light switch behind him, coupled with the simultaneous illumination of the fluorescent lights above. He also heard the sound of the office door closing shut. Yes, Ed believed this would, in fact, be his last visit to Raymond Garner's office.

“Good morning, Ed.”

Ed cleared his throat. “Hi, Raymond.”

“I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I made a couple of stops on the way to my office.” Raymond walked smoothly past Ed. Ed could smell cologne or aftershave. Not a subtle scent, but one that drove straight to the point. Raymond was broadcasting his cologne to anyone in range. Was it a gift from the maturing duckling on Father's Day? Birthday, perhaps?

Ed could see two, plain-white, business-size envelopes in Raymond's hand. This was no fatalistic paranoia playing through Ed's thoughts; he was being fired. His mind raced through all of the possible reasons and finally settled on three pretty good ones: habitually late from lunch, long and frequent smoke breaks, add to that the painful admission that no one at the office really liked him. Was there anything else? Because he was a duck? A slightly overweight mustachioed duck?

“We're letting you go, Ed.”

Just like that. In the midst of it all, Ed admired Raymond's directness.

He neither liked nor disliked his job, but it had infused him with a comfortable feeling of purgatory that allowed him to forget about nearly everything for eight hours a day, five days a week. Everyone at the office left Ed alone, and he, in turn, didn't talk to them. He preferred it that way. Ed disliked unnecessary relationships. Maybe it wasn't that he disliked the unnecessary relationships so much as that he was terrible at the necessary ones.

After the death of his dad three months earlier, he'd come to the realization that he was terrible at the necessary relationships simply because he categorized relationships as either “necessary” or “unnecessary.” The ones that fell into the former category seemed to Ed relationships that needed to be nurtured and maintained in order to ensure his humanity—they were, in fact, necessary. Here, the

concept of nurturing and maintenance brought thoughts of tedium and routine-work, in other words. What else is there that can suck the joy out of something more thoroughly than when that thing is converted into work? He avoided relationships that he felt he had to work at in order to maintain. The act of avoiding those relationships led to feelings of guilt at not working harder on his part to keep ties to family and friends strong. If he had to work so hard just to keep up relations with those he loved, how in the hell could he expect himself to engage in the day-to-day chitchat of interactions with co-workers, grocery clerks and casual acquaintances?

Getting fired gave him a good reason to go out on a serious bender—a memory erasing drunk that started shortly after depositing his last paycheck into his checking account and cashing the check for his unused week’s vacation. That one, the vacation check, that was drinking money: \$383.27. Ed was pretty sure he couldn’t drink that much, but it was worth a try. Let it be a crass solo flight around the bar tap. A barfly newly born, if just for one night, if just for one seriously what-the-hell-have-I-got-to-lose? booze-drenched evening.

Ed remembered looking at his watch shortly after three that afternoon and realizing that he was already very drunk and he’d only managed to spend a little over thirty dollars. He remembered cigarette after cigarette until his lungs burned and then the near euphoric sensation when the smoke being drawn in tasted crisp and cool like fresh air. He remembered the sky growing dark as evening came, and not much beyond that waning of day.

When he finally got out of bed the next day, he smelled like too many cigarettes. He could still taste beer, maybe whiskey, Scotch—who knew what else? As Ed made his way into the bathroom, he found that his breathing was difficult. He had to sit down against the wall. His lungs and heart felt as if they might come out of him. Had he smoked that much? Some sort of anatomical revolt was beginning. His stomach hurt, his eyes hurt, and his balls hurt. Ed didn’t remember getting home. He didn’t remember leaving the bar. He noticed then, feeling the hair on his arms beginning to stand on end, that the door to his apartment was ajar, his keys still in the lock.

Cold panic bolted through him, a feeling like touching an electric fence. It was the kind of panic that might seize the heart after days

of paranoia, of finally being found out for doing something horrible: murder or maybe incest.

He stood up, legs weak and trembling. Ed wondered if his car was in decent shape, making him wonder if he'd killed anyone in a booze-induced hit and run. Drinking, drinking, so drunk he didn't actually remember driving home. He hoped he hadn't driven. He hoped the bartender or one of the wait staff at Dillon's noticed he was decimated by the time he'd left.

Let's hope they stuck me in a taxi, Ed thought, a yellow taxi with old upholstery; a taxi with a vulgar driver discussing politics with a man too drunk to figure out if it was an election year.

He took the keys out of the door and thought about walking out to the parking lot to look for his car when the sick, hangover shakes hit him. The poisoned feeling took over. His lungs felt raw, he could taste only ashes, beer, and if he was not mistaken, the peaty grimace of neat Scotch whiskey. It made him feel worse and the shakes, the shakes, the shakes were going for his stomach and Ed had to make it fast to the bathroom.

He welcomed it when the nausea finally swept over him and made him vomit. He welcomed it until he realized he would have to remain prostrate before the toilet with dry heaves pulling his guts inside out and making his eyes feel as though they were tight in the maw of a pair of vice-grips unwilling to let go.

Ed thought he'd passed out at one point. He wasn't sure if he'd smacked his head on the toilet bowl or if the exertions of his body trying to expel the alcohol had finally overwhelmed him. Whatever had happened, there remained in Ed's memory a brief, dream-like feeling of peace where the sick feeling became non-existent. A moment of floating and warmth where he could see something just out of his reach. He knew if he could just reach it, whatever "it" might be, then the sickness would pass and everything would be all right. Even before he could consider what that something wonderful might be, it was gone, and Ed was heaving so that it felt as if his ribs might crack.

He felt like crying. There was nothing left for him to do except cry. Though the dry heaves had not hit him for several minutes, the nausea remained, and much to Ed's shame, he realized that at

some point he'd managed to shit himself. Quite involuntary, but there it was all the same. He didn't think he had the strength to get up and take care of it.

Ed wept quietly. The uncontrollable need to keep vomiting had passed. The awful sensation of the alcohol and nicotine poisoning that brought the shakes and vomiting was gone. The smell of the shit in his pants though, was overwhelming. He feared it would bring on a fresh bout of nausea.

"Oh hell," he said aloud. His voice sounded hoarse. "Christ, I hope I had fun last night!"

As if in response, the phone in the living room rang. It rang four times as Ed lay there, propped up by one elbow on a linoleum floor that hadn't seen a broom or a vacuum in weeks. The answering machine picked up and a feeling of cement in his aching guts told him it was the police calling to tell him that his car had been found wrapped around a tree somewhere in Meridian Township. No, that couldn't be it. The police would just come a-knockin'.

He heard the digital recording of his voice announce to the caller that he wasn't able to reach the phone. *Nope, not able to reach the phone at all*, thought Ed, *what with all of the kaka in my drawers. Would they please leave a message? Why, yes!*

It was Margaret. Margaret with the voice like cold water. The eyes and face that were so tired it made Ed want to yawn just thinking of her. Margaret, his older sister.

"Ed?" Margaret's voice dug at him. With the way he felt now, her voice was like a tick trying to sink its head beneath his skin. Definitely parasitic, definitely unwanted. "I know you're probably hard at work at the office doing your data entry, or whatever it is you do there." Ed thought he could hear her yawn. "Anyway, when you get back in this evening, give me and Mom a call. Well," she paused, her voice shaking, just enough to make Ed roll his eyes. That wasn't a yawn, she was on the verge of tears, here come the tears. Margaret's tears. Drip, drip. A river of tears. A lake. His sister's voice continued to speak, continued to be recorded for Ed to enjoy when he got back from doing "whatever it is" he did there.

"Get fired! That's what I do there," he muttered to the answering machine.

“. . . so just give us a call. Well, give me a call. Okay?”

Her voice grew silent, making Ed wonder if she'd hung up. No, he could hear his sister crying. He felt suddenly terrible for resenting her. She was doing more than he would have done. More than he could do, perhaps. And what had he done after Dad's funeral? He'd told Margaret to handle it, to do whatever she thought was best. Why? Because he couldn't do it, didn't want to do it. His mother was a burden he couldn't carry, and instead of pitching in, shouldering part of the burden until he and Margaret could figure something out, he'd simply refused any part of it. As far as he was concerned, Dad should have put Mom in a nursing home before she'd gotten this bad.

Ed waited, feeling and smelling the hangover lingering in his clothes, in his guts, in the stale and soiled air, in every wave of light from the five bulbs above the vanity.

“I can't do it, Ed,” Margaret had regained her voice. “I don't know how Dad did it for so long, but I can't. I don't blame you for staying away. I don't blame you at all, but if you could just call. I need to talk. We need to talk. You don't have to make any decisions. I'll do it all, but I just need to talk to you about it. She's your mother, too.”

There was another pause; Ed listened, waiting for her to end the message with a “Goodbye,” or “Talk to you later.” Instead, Margaret's voice reported what kept him away from home, what he didn't have the courage to face himself.

“She's getting worse. It doesn't seem possible for it to be worse, but I don't even know if Mom's in there anymore. She's gotten worse since the funeral. I just can't do it by myself. So give me a call,” Ed heard a snuffle, “okay?”

The answering machine beeped to signal it had received a message.

“Yeah,” Ed said, wishing for nothing more than to get cleaned up and then burn his clothes. If only that were the worst of his problems. Well, he'd been fired, hadn't he? Maybe that's enough of an excuse to give Margaret a hand. He was now officially unencumbered by the responsibilities of the duly employed. He could afford to make the drive to Port Grace and help Margaret with Mom.

It was Mansy Cribbins who found Mom at the end of the dock, staring into the water. He'd gone out to fill his bird feeders with black oil sunflower seeds. "I feed those damned squirrels just as much as I feed the chickadees and nuthatches," Ed had heard him comment on more than one occasion. Mom was found sitting in her wheelchair, eyelids drooping, mouth gaping, gazing into the water at the capsized aluminum fishing boat that Dad had used for fishing on Grace Lake ever since Ed could remember. That was August.

Almonzo had about twenty years on Ed's parents. Ed had known him all of his life. Almonzo's wife Laurie had given him the nickname 'Mansy'. 'Just like Little House on the Prairie,' she used to tell anyone who'd ask. 'Except I'm not Laura Ingalls and he's not Almonzo Wilder, so I can't call him 'Manly,' that's why he's Mansy.'

She'd been outside on the dock all night, Mansy told him. "God bless her," he said, "she stayed right out there with him, Ed. I feel just awful, and I hope you and Margaret can forgive me for not finding her sooner, for not being there to help your Dad. If she screamed for help, I didn't hear her, and neither did Laurie, I swear it. I'd have run out there in just my socks if I'd heard a thing."

Ed stuffed his soiled clothes into a trash bag and showered under water hot enough to hurt. He stood there with the water hitting the back of his neck until the shower grew tepid. The hot water had eased the throbbing in his guts and his head, but his mind became troubled with panic when he tried to remember how he'd gotten home.

What is the last thing I can remember? he thought.

He remembered euphoria and abandon upon lighting the last cigarette in his pack and having it taste like the first warm breeze of spring. He remembered that was when he decided he would start drinking the best single malt Scotch behind the bar. He couldn't remember what it was, save the bartender had said to him, "blahblahblah . . . sixteen year old . . . blahblah . . . very peaty . . . blah . . . Isle of Islay." Remembering he'd drunk Scotch brought the taste back to him. The nausea was gone, but it made him grimace all the same. The taste of it made him remember. He remembered drinking with an older guy. A businessman of some sort. An insurance agent? Stockbroker? No, something a little more esoteric.

There'd been something startling about the man. His eyes.

The man had stared at Ed as though he'd just discovered a winning lottery ticket on the men's room floor. A feeling of embarrassment dug at Ed's insides. The man had given him a ride home. He could only remember pieces of it. Ed remembered shivering, with his head resting against the passenger window of the man's car. He remembered trying to close his eyes, waiting to get home as everything spun. His vision surged and spun with his eyes open, accelerating beyond feverish proportions, so he'd closed them and made it worse.

Ed didn't remember getting home. He couldn't remember much more than that one moment on the ride to his apartment, but he remembered that the look in the man's eyes reminded him of his Uncle Dale. It was a hungry look, the kind of hunger that Ed imagined a starving man might have in his eyes.

Uncle Dale had looked a little spooky like that, spooky like there was some secret behind his crazy, hungry look, some secret that Ed might want to know, but would regret, wish he could give back upon finding out what it was. Colin Clive had the same look in *Frankenstein*. "The dead can walk again," the look said, "ask me how!"

When Ed was nine, Uncle Dale, his dad's older and only brother, had spent a week with them. It was the only time Ed could remember meeting him. Uncle Dale knew the Chinese alphabet. He could spin a quarter on his elbow and a dime on his nose (*learned how to do that in a bar in Winnipeg, Eddie*). His mother disliked Dale: "Bad habits! He's like a walking, talking poster for bad habits! Nothing but a jack-ass!" His mother had opinions then. His mother had a mind.

Ed had begged to go with them when his dad drove Uncle Dale back to his trailer in Standish. Uncle Dale had wrecked his own car on the way home from a bar the night before.

No one spoke during the five-hour drive. It was just Dad, Uncle Dale, and Ed; but no one spoke. Ed was afraid he'd be yelled at, his dad wasn't talking and that meant mad. He didn't think he was mad at Dale, not really. It was Mom he was mad at; he slammed the door when they left. They'd argued about why it couldn't wait another day-another day, just to see if Dale could get his car situation worked out.

When they'd gotten to Uncle Dale's, Dad helped Dale with his suitcases. He set them on the lawn next to the driveway and stood there looking up at the blue sky. Ed remembered looking up too-how blue and clear! It was as blue as forever. Grasshoppers buzzed in the tall weeds in the vacant lot next to Dale's trailer. Goldfinches lighted on bull thistles, twittering, the purple thistle wands bobbing under their weight. Uncle Dale smoked a cigarette and stared at the ground.

"Sure am sorry about all the trouble," Uncle Dale had said when his cigarette was done, flicked into the gravel driveway, smoldering out.

"Yeah," Ed's dad answered, still looking at the sky. "Maybe you'll come see us again when you get your shit together. Ed thinks he's got a new best friend."

"Sure. He's great. Your wife ain't never really liked me much, though. Guess I didn't change her opinion any."

Ed never saw Uncle Dale again. It was only a few weeks after they'd driven him home when his dad took a few days off work for Dale's funeral. But when it came time to leave, Martin Derringer decided he didn't want to see his brother laid out in a coffin and lowered into the ground.

"Do you remember your Uncle Dale?" his dad asked him later, when Ed was older, a teenager, fifteen maybe, fishing on the lake in the aluminum fishing boat. "Nothing slowed him down. Stupid sonofabitch. We all thought it was going to be the booze that'd take him." He remembered his dad shaking his head slowly and smiling. "You just never know, Ed. Who knew it was going to be a brain tumor? I guess Dale knew. Do you think he'd tell me?" His dad chuckled, a laugh completely absent of mirth. "You'd have thought he'd tell me."

Ed wondered now, as he stood in the shower rubbing his scalp through his hair with the tips of his fingers, if it was Dale's knowledge of his own life near its end that brought on the reckless drinking.

The water felt good. Sometimes Ed believed the shower was a trap, perhaps shrouding a hidden power lurking within the gallons of water spraying from the shower head, a power that waited to prey on the weakest bathers. "Stay with me," it said, "stay with me." The feeling of the hot shower on naked skin was mesmerizing, enticing in

the same way the syrupy beads of a carnivorous honeydew plant must seem to passing insects before being trapped and slowly digested with dissolving enzymes.

Ed imagined himself drowning. He imagined the struggle to hang on, hang on, before drawing water into his lungs for the final, suffocating end.

The boat capsized clean, smooth, and hit Dad square on the head. He didn't even know he'd drowned. He was already unconscious.

Mom had been there that night, out on the dock, enjoying the summer dark and evening breeze, keeping Dad company, as much as she could, as he fished some hundred yards or so off the dock.

"Mom heard a splash, Ed. You know how she goes in and out. That's as much as she could tell us," Margaret told him, "she thought it was a fish jumping. She couldn't even tell what happened; you know how her eyes are at night. You know how her mind is."

Yes, he knew his mom. He knew a side of his mom that no one else did. A side of his mother that visited in dreams. He knew the part of his mom that hid in a wheelchair, hiding behind careful eyes, eyes that seemed to not want to see as much as they could. Eyes stupid with senility—senility shadowed by the occasional passage of lucidity. In those dreams, Ed blamed her for his father's death. It couldn't possibly have been her fault, but the dreams lingered long after waking. In the dream, his mother sat in her wheelchair. The dementia clouding her face was nothing more than a mask. Her shadow cast on the floor from an unknown light source. The shadow that should have been a distorted and darkened silhouette of his mother cast quietly on the living room floor had awakened: a spider shape spinning a web around some newly trapped prey.

Premature senile dementia, her doctors labeled it, for lack of anything better. An unfortunate mental condition brought on from years of multiple sclerosis. They didn't know the pathology behind it, but that was their professional diagnosis. The best that a whole room full of specialists could say for certain was that it wasn't Alzheimer's. He'd spent the last years of high school growing ashamed as his mother's mind deteriorated. Ed had grown to hate her for it. He hated her dislocated and confusing speech. He hated her wheelchair.

Ed sighed. He did feel better after the shower. He'd need to get his car. Time to stop dwelling on Mom. Mother with the quick shadow. He'd taken a ride home with some guy that was probably the same age as his dad. A guy that had reminded him of Uncle Dale. Ed wondered if it was bad luck for a stranger to remind him of a dead person.

Was that a sign? What kind of a sign? Ed didn't believe in omens, but he considered them often.

He dressed and walked into the living room. He'd need to take a taxi back to Dillon's Bar so he could pick up his Grand Prix. He hoped it hadn't been towed. He doubted it, but bad luck had a tendency to be a frequent visitor once it found the right address.

Ed was surprised to see two messages on his answering machine. He knew that one was from Margaret. The other one? Perhaps left while he'd been in the shower. Ed pushed the playback button and the machine clicked twice as something in its digital memory retrieved information. He thought the first message would be Margaret, but it wasn't.

"Hello, Mr. Derringer," a man's voice said. "I hope this message finds you well. I can't recall seeing a young man toss back as much liquor as you did last night. It's 11 AM and I am calling to let you know, in case your memory is patchy, that a Mr. John Stanford gave you a ride home. That's me. I'm an Assurance Agent. I procure assurances. I occasionally give assurances, but that isn't the purpose of this call. You gave me your assurance that you would repay the favor of transportation home from a night of excess by giving me a moment of your time, something that might be easier when you were in a clearer state of mind. I trust the effects of the alcohol you consumed yesterday have worn off, in which case I'd like to take that moment from you this evening. I'll meet you at Dillon's when you get there to pickup your car. A taxi will be sent to pick you up at 7 o'clock this evening. The taxi will be paid for in advance by me, as your wallet is currently in my possession. Thank you, Mr. Derringer."

The message ended. Ed hit the stop button on the machine. He didn't want to hear Margaret's voice again.