

# DEVIL'S DANCE

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Accident*

1980

Though I have been a practicing internist for fifteen years, the middle-of-the night phone call still has a way of jarring me into a preternatural fear of death, one that goes back to childhood when Grandma had her heart attack, and Dad, his galoshes unbuttoned, ran out of the house into the grey winter night. Harry and I, awakened by the commotion, sat with Mom in the kitchen drinking hot cocoa, until about an hour later when Dad called from the hospital, and Mom covered her face with her hands and started to cry.

I am awakened at the first ring. While reaching for the phone, I check the fluorescent dial on the clock radio. Three a.m. When I discover it is my sister-in-law, Sandy, calling from the Muhlenberg ER, I sit up at the edge of the bed. Sandy's usual calm, lucid manner of speaking borders on the hysterical, and I am barely able to understand her.

"Calm down or I'm hanging up on you," I say to Sandy. In a million years I would never hang up on my sister-in-law.

"Don't you understand? Harry's been in an accident."

"Is he alive?" Always the first question I ask.

"Of course he's alive. Very much alive."

Not dead! Relief is instant. If you survive the initial trauma from an automobile accident, barring brain damage or a spinal injury, your chances for a full recovery are dramatically improved.

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I awaken Doris, who over the years has conditioned herself to sleep peacefully through these nocturnal invasions of our life. "It's Sandy," I whisper "Harry's been in an accident." I switch on the night-light. "Hold on, Sandy," I say into the phone.

Doris props herself up against the thick walnut backboard. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" Doris likes to express serious feelings with repetitive expletives, a minor annoyance one learns to live with after twenty years.

"How badly has he been hurt?" I ask Sandy.

"I don't know exactly."

"Is he conscious?"

"Yes."

"Fractures?"

"I don't think so."

I put my hand over the phone. "Harry is alive and conscious." Doris's *Oh, my God's* immediately turn into a series of *Thank Gods!*

Hospital rounds are at six-forty-five. Office hours start at eight. With luck I'll finish the day by seven. After supper I deal with Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance forms. I have religiously kept up this schedule since I have been in practice. Going to the hospital at three in the morning, however, is a part of the job you never quite get used to.

Harry likes to tell me that I work too hard for the wrong reasons, that I don't know how to enjoy my life. "*The bow cannot always stand bent, nor can human frailty subsist without some lawful recreation.*" Now and then Harry, the English professor and author of four novels, and one book of poetry, will quote you from the classics to remind you how illiterate you are. He recited this particular quotation two years ago at a cousin's wedding in a rare moment of brotherly concern. At the time he was half-drunk. Still, when

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Harry spoke, I always listened, a habit I had acquired early in childhood.

"Have you any idea of the extent of Harry's injuries?" I ask Sandy.

"The doctor said something about a possible shoulder separation."

"Is that it?"

"As far as I know."

"And yourself?"

"Me?" Her voice registers surprise. "I'm perfect, Roger. Just perfect."

"I'm an internist, Sandy. I know as much about shoulders as you do." An exaggeration. Nevertheless, you would have guessed that Sandy, a high school biology teacher, would have known a thing or two about the human body, and realized that I am the wrong man to consult for this type of injury. "Did the ER doctor call in the Orthopedic resident?"

"You don't understand--" A recorded voice interrupts demanding an additional five cents for the next three minutes. "I can't explain it over the phone." When the recording begins to repeat itself, Sandy cries: "Please come down, Roger! You've got to help me!" Then she hangs up. Just like that. For want of a nickel Ma Bell can do terrible things to a normally rational person.

In the bathroom I splash cold water on my face. I look into the mirror, step back as far as I can, suck in my gut. To get rid of my pot Doris wants me to ride stationary bicycles and run on mechanized walkers at Jack LaLanne's on Route 22 in Springfield. She has already joined with her dumpy sister, Irene. Twice a week they work out for thirty minutes, then go to the Scotswood Diner and eat cheesecake, drink coffee, and brag about their children.

I return to the bed and sit at the edge where I

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begin to play with my socks.

"Why are you dawdling when your brother's in an emergency room?" Doris asks.

"Relax. It doesn't sound very serious."

"They don't put people in emergency rooms for nothing."

"It happens. A heart attack turns out to be indigestion. A fracture becomes a sprain. Hypochondriacs spend their lives in emergency rooms. Have you forgotten that my brother Harry is a little crazy?"

"But Sandy isn't. She wouldn't have called you unless she thought it was important. Now get going, Roger."

Just once, Dear Lord, make Doris go rushing out into the night, while old Dr. Kildare returns to his soft, sweet bed where he can enjoy five more uninterrupted hours of blissful sleep.

I find my shoes under the dresser, then go to the closet. "Where's my gray pants?" I ask, while rummaging about.

"Look!"

"Who messed up my closet?"

"You are being unnecessarily hostile."

Twenty years ago Doris had been a psych major at college, which accounts for words peppering her vocabulary, such as "neurotic," "anxious," and especially, "hostile." Surprisingly, she rolls out of bed, and in seconds finds the pants I have been looking for, then underhands them at me like a soft ball pitcher. The pants are on the wrinkled side, and I make a face.

"I'll get out the iron," she says back in bed.

The last time Doris ironed my pants was in her dreams. I straighten out the creases the best I can. "I wish you'd be a little more congenial toward my brother," I say. "It's because of you that we never

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seem to get together anymore."

"That's not true. The real reason is that he's not interested in seeing you, except, of course, if he needs you professionally. Like now."

Doris is not an unkind person. Her anger toward Harry has some real basis. More than once over the years I have heard Harry ridicule an opinion she had thoughtfully expressed. Doris, never one to share a joke at her own expense, doesn't care or try to understand that Harry's sense of humor is more often than not good-natured.

"What you don't realize is that Harry and I play games with each other," I say. "Harry needs to boss me around, and I let him do it because it makes him happy."

"Why is it so important to make Harry happy? He doesn't care if he makes you happy."

This is a discussion we've had more than once over the years. Before it becomes an argument, one I always lose, I finish dressing and disappear into the bathroom to brush my teeth and comb my hair. "I'll call you from the hospital," I say on my way out of the room.

"Don't bother." She rolls over. In a muffled voice, her mouth pressed against her pillow, she says, "Call me, call me."

All I hear is a sick whine when I turn on the ignition to start my Mercedes. A thirty-five thousand-dollar car with nine thousand miles and a battery as dead as the night at three-twenty in the morning. I open the other garage door. Doris's Range Rover purrs neatly, and I think, as one who grew up watching old World War II movies, that in an emergency Americans are better off counting on the English for help than the Germans.

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Driving into the physician's parking lot, I realize that I have left my magnetized card key in the Mercedes and am forced to back up and park in the guest parking lot. I do not appreciate the extra hundred yards walk back to the ER, especially when I observe Sandy pacing about in front of the entrance, alternately checking her wristwatch and searching the street.

Sandy is a tall, graceful woman in her early forties. Her face is a bit on the bony side for my taste, though I suppose most men would find her sculptured look attractive. She is wearing one of those colored gypsy type dresses that drape down almost to the ankles. Her long straight brown hair falls loosely over her shoulders. She uses no makeup to brighten her pale, clear skin. It is Harry who likes her to keep that Sixties's hippie look.

Sandy's greeting lacks the usual perfunctory kiss that has become our habit after twenty-two years of being related by marriage. "What took you so long?" she barks, then grabs my arm and pulls me into the waiting room.

Except the receptionist and a middle-aged black man sleeping peacefully in a corner, the large room is deserted, unusual for an urban area where street violence is routine. On a wall mounted TV, a Jimmy Stewart, Marlene Dietrich film is playing: "Destry Rides Again," which next to "Shane" is my all-time favorite cowboy flick. In a contralto that sounds as if it has been soaked in vinegar, Dietrich is serenading a room full of drunken cowboys. Her eyes flash seductively toward Stewart, who is leaning against the bar jawing on a wad of tobacco bigger than his mouth.

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The receptionist, a young Oriental woman, is sitting at a desk partitioned by glass from the waiting room. Lined up behind her are filing cabinets and a copying machine. She keeps glancing up over her computer toward the TV, but seems bored with the old black and white movie. The room, with its drooped ceiling and fluorescent lighting, its scrubbed cream colored walls and frayed wall to wall carpeting, is pretty much the same as any number of emergency waiting rooms I have passed through over the years.

Sandy whispers angrily, "I'm going to leave him, Roger. I can't take it anymore."

Harsh words from my normally placid, sweet-tempered sister-in-law. One of the few constants in my life is that Harry and Sandy would be together for eternity.

"Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

"Harry is playing around," she blurts out angrily.

"I don't believe it." Harry is eccentric, but he would never cheat on Sandy.

"He is fucking every little girl he can lay his hands on, and this is the result."

Sandy never curses. "Have you been drinking?" She offers me one of her wry little grins, which over the years invariably have had the effect of stopping me dead in my tracks. "I think you're a little excited right now," I say. "Where's Harry?"

"Inside." She points toward the swinging doors that lead into the ER. "The doctor said something about making sure he was okay before letting him go. It was a good thing he was wearing his helmet or they'd have been picking his brains out of the gutter."

"His helmet?"

"You didn't know about the Yamaha?" She

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appears astonished at my ignorance.

"Harry plays the piano with a helmet on?"

"Yamaha also makes motorcycles, Roger. He bought his 600 over a month ago. A couple nights a week, he puts on his jet black leather jacket and his jet black helmet with Thor's red thunderbolts painted on its sides, and rides off into the night like one of Hell's Angels. Sometimes he doesn't come home until early morning."

"Harry rides around all night on a motorcycle?"

In his youth Harry liked to brawl. He always drove cars too fast. But motorcycles and young girls?

"He claimed he hit an oil slick and the bike went out of control. It was a miracle he didn't break every bone in his body," she says. Then as an afterthought she adds, "But the girl riding with him wasn't so lucky."

"He had a girl with him? Who?"

"One of his students, I think." For a moment I am afraid that she might burst into tears, but she perks up and says, "The girl's been hurt badly."

"Was Harry drinking?"

"I don't know. More likely drugs."

"What kind of drugs?" Not impossible. In the Sixties Harry experimented with LSD and marijuana. His first novel was about communal living and drugs. After Alan was born, he and Sandy left New Mexico to live in New Jersey, and Harry began to teach English at a junior college in Union County. Harry cut his hair and shaved his beard, practiced being respectable, but he was always edgy, which was reflected in his second novel, the tale of a suburban real estate broker who wanted life to be more than PTA meetings and backyard cookouts. He began to use cocaine, and wound up stealing bicycles and old tires from his neighbors' garages to help support his habit.



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"One moment he's sullen and brooding, the next a maniac," Sandy says. "Big mood swings." She takes a deep breath and gives me her pinched lips look, the hurt, confused one. "Last week he accused me of having an affair with the gym teacher at the high school. According to Harry, we have been practicing gymnastics in my office after hours."

"Gymnastics in an office?"

"Roger, what's the matter with you? You're a grown man, for crying out loud."

She becomes misty-eyed and I want to console her, but I am distracted by gunshots and look toward the TV. Jimmy Stewart, a smoking six-gun in hand, is shooting it out with Brian Donlevy. I love the old westerns: no moral dilemmas, no shades of gray, goodness always triumphant over evil.

I take one of Sandy's hands and pat it lightly. "It'll be okay," I say, just as Donlevy takes a bullet in the gut and goes crashing to the floor on his way to hell.

I find Harry stripped to his underwear, resting on an examining table in a booth partitioned by six foot walls and a curtain covering the entrance. When he sees me, he props himself up, swinging his legs around and over the edge of the table. "Hey, little brother. Come to rescue me?"

"You look like you were in a coal mine explosion."

He has a small bruise on his right elbow and a cut above one eye. A lacerated right thigh has been sutured but not bandaged. Dirt is smeared on his forehead and cheeks; his thick, black hair is wildly unkempt; he hasn't shaven in days.

"Nice to see you, kid."

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"Are you okay?" I inch in closer and try to get a whiff of his breath.

"Never felt better in my life."

"Why didn't you let them take x-rays?"

"What for?" He flails his arms and kicks his legs about. "Nothing broken." Then he winces in pain and touches his right shoulder.

The ER doctor has informed me that other than soft tissue injuries to his thigh and elbow, Harry appears to have suffered nothing more serious than a minor shoulder separation and a slight concussion. Since Harry refuses to be X-rayed or give urine or blood samples, the doctor couldn't be positive that he might not have internal injuries.

"Do you mind if I examine you?" Something about his expression puzzles me. His eyes are unable to focus on me, as if his ocular muscles do not function normally.

"How's Mitzi?" he asks.

"Mitzi, I take it, is the name of the girl who was riding with you?"

"Every time I ask about her, I get doubletalk from one of the geniuses around here."

"The admitting nurse told me that she's upstairs in intensive care." A strange lingering half grin on his face quickly dissipates.

"When can I see her?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"Can't you do something? You're a big shot in this hospital." The old habit: Harry trying to boss me around.

"You just don't go barging into ICU."

"You can do it."

"They're probably running all sorts of tests on her. She could have a sub-dural hematoma, a fractured skull."

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Harry's facial muscles knot grotesquely. His upper lip begins to quiver, as he seems to be experiencing an involuntary facial muscle spasm. He tries to talk, but is unable get the first word out, like a chronic stutterer.

"Take it easy, Harry."

He nods and breathes deeply. His struggle to speak is painful to watch. "I-I-I must see her, Roger," he says at last. "Please." Harry never begs. He has this pride that is cast in iron. You don't break it, you don't bend it. Me. I'm always apologizing for something. I apologize out of habit. I go out of my way to find things to apologize for.

"I'll find out what I can as soon as possible," I say. He looks baffled, then closes his eyes for a second. When he reopens them, he appears more alert, more normal.

"I'd like to examine you," I say.

"The other doctor already did."

"It'll only take a few more minutes."

"Go ahead, if it'll make you happy."

"A few questions, first."

"The third degree. I love it."

"How fast were you going when you fell off the motorcycle?"

"Mach one. I wasn't watching the speedometer, Rog. I was having fun."

"Sandy said something about an oil slick."

At the mention of Sandy's name he becomes aroused. "What does she know? Was she there?"

"Were you drinking?"

He makes a peculiar grimace where he lifts one side of his mouth and seems to smile sardonically. "A few beers." He pulls himself up a little higher.

"How hard did you hit your head?"

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He begins to sing: *"He flies through the air with the greatest of ease--"*

"For Christ's sake, Harry, have a heart. It's the middle of the night."

"We landed on somebody's recently sodded lawn. Soft and cushy. Lucky, wouldn't you say?"

Not so lucky for Mitzi, I am tempted to remind him. Baiting Harry never works for me. I always wind up feeling worse. "Did you lose consciousness?" I ask.

"Birdies were singing, but not for long." His mood changes and he becomes sullen, angry. Finally he says, "Did Sandy tell you I was drinking?"

"Not exactly."

"The woman is psycho."

My inclination is to take my sister-in-law's side, but I hear Doris telling me that it is none of my business. "Sit up straight, and don't move," I order.

I walk behind him and pull up his tee shirt. The skin covering his lean, muscular back is unbruised except in the area around his right shoulder joint where there is a slight laceration and swelling. I reach around him and with a gentle bear hug compress his rib cage. I percuss his lungs, listen to his heart. One can never be absolutely certain about an internal injury. Six months ago I examined a patient whose only symptom was an occasional shortness of breath. He turned out to have a ruptured aortic valve from horsing around with his grandchildren.

"Lie down," I command.

"Am I going to live, doc?"

I palpate his abdomen, check his spleen and liver. In motorcycle accidents anything is possible. "Sit up again."

"Up, down. How much is this costing me?"

I bend his neck, poke at his extremities. With my

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ophthalmoscope I look into his eyes, switch points and examine his ears, nose, ask him to stick out his tongue. He is only able to protrude a small portion of the tongue outside his mouth. "Stick it out," I tell him.

"That's as far as it goes, Dad." Again I observe that peculiar smirk of us.

"Hold out your arms." The right hand seems to jump around, an odd little dancing movement. "How long have you had those tremors?" Not exactly a tremor, but I don't know what else to call it.

Harry quickly withdraws his arms, resting them against the table. "Never noticed," he says.

"Stand up and walk back and forth."

I detect a slightly widened gait. Parkinson's comes to mind, and I remember Dad once mentioning that he had an aunt who had the disease late in life.

"Why do you look at your feet when you walk?" I ask.

"Cause I got beautiful feet."

"Sit down again. A few more questions, if you don't mind."

"Does the bill go up?"

"Have you been feeling okay lately?"

"Like a million bucks."

"No headaches, funny pains--"

"Nothing."

"--irregular bowel movements, blood in your urine."

"What do my bowel movements have to do with flying off a bike?"

"Do you find yourself blinking excessively, grinding your teeth when you're angry?"

Harry leans to one side and rests on an elbow. He nods his head up and down, then side to side. Yes,

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no, yes, no. He wants to annoy me, a childhood habit he would sometimes employ against me in retaliation for my incessant teasing. Several years ago I examined a sixteen-year old girl, who had this inverted way of shuffling when she walked, her hands shaking the way Harry's right hand did. I referred her to the neurologist, who diagnosed her condition as a generalized dystonia, a rare condition occurring in Jews of Northern European extract. Parkinson's, dystonia, what would I be thinking of next? If I had flown off a motorcycle at fifty miles an hour and had landed on my head, my hands might be shaking, too.

"Is that it, Doc?" Harry asks.

"What about cocaine?"

"What about it?" He looks at me with a blank stare, then begins to laugh as if I have just delivered the punch line to a really funny story. After he calms himself, he says, "Why don't you ask Sandy what she's been using lately?"

"You can't keep cocaine a secret for long."

"Once in a blue moon I smoke a little pot. It's nothing. You ought to try it yourself. It might shake some of the bullshit out of you."

"Jesus, Harry, you could lose your job."

"What world do you live in, Roger? Every day half the faculty is high on something." Harry stands up. "I'd like to get out of here. Where are my clothes?"

"You can't leave yet. They still have to bandage your wound, and run a few more tests on you."

"You guys never quit, do you?"

"You could walk out of here feeling okay, and drop dead on your way home."

"Terrific, then Sandy could sue the hospital. She'd be able to buy a new car, furs, jewelry, lace panties, build a gym in the basement."

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He sits again on the examining table. For all his bravado, he looks repentant, his eyes, half-closed, an expression, morbidly grim. His lean, powerful body slumps down on the table as if his spinal column can no longer support the weight of his skeleton. "I wanted to give Mitzi my helmet, but it was too big for her," he says.

"How did you meet her?"

"She was one of my students." He doesn't bother turning his head to look at me, preferring to stare at the ceiling. The Harry I had known all my life always looked you straight in the eye, demanding that you pay careful attention to what he was saying. "Several months ago she came to my office and complained about the low grades I was giving her on her papers. She was already on probation. If she flunked English she'd have to go home. She said she'd become a hustler first. The girl wrote sentences like a camel, but you had to admire her spirit. Now and then I'd bump into her at the University Tavern and we'd have a few beers together, which is what happened last night. Later, she asked me if I wouldn't mind giving her a lift back to her dormitory."

"After all, you didn't want her walking the streets."

Harry laughs. "There are some things that never change. You're still a pussy, Roger."

"What about this nocturnal life of yours?" I repress my anger the way I always have when Harry would insult me.

Harry's eyes swing upward. "*Over the mountains\Of the Moon, \Down the Valley of the Shadow, \Ride, boldly ride,*"*\The shade replied--\If you seek for Eldorado!*"

"How about Alan?" I ask.

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"What about him?"

"How do you think he's going to feel when he finds out about Mitzi?"

"I come home in the evening and only the dog greets me. Alan is in his room doing his homework, or playing his violin. He's doing his life. He doesn't need me to wipe his nose anymore."

"You know that's a lot of baloney. And Sandy?"

"Sandy is putting mileage on the car and running down our bank account. I'm not complaining. Just don't make a big deal out of how much my family needs me."

I want to tell Harry that he is going through a mid-life crisis, that he is probably going to wind up losing his job and his family. But he'd only laugh and call my opinion mid-life bullshit. I pick up my physician's bag and start to leave. I turn and say, "I'll try to find out about Mitzi. After they finish you up at the ER, go home. I'll call you first thing in the morning."

He looks at me again with that unnatural grimace of his. Maybe he's disappointed that I don't seem interested in quarreling with him.

I push aside the curtain and leave the examining room. At the front desk, I call upstairs to the ICU and ask about Mitzi. She's unconscious, but stable.

In the waiting room I find Sandy slumped in her chair, half-asleep, a strange faraway look on her face. I sit next to her and she immediately straightens up.

"So?" she asks.

"I couldn't find very much the matter with him."

"What about the girl?"

"She's alive."

I am suddenly very weary and want only to return to bed and grab a few precious hours of sleep before I have to start my day anew. I stand up. "I'll call you tomorrow," I say.



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"Where are you going?"

"Home."

She arises from her chair. Standing next to me, her mouth is almost on the same level as mine. She drapes an arm on my shoulder and stares at me with large, expressive eyes that could charm a grizzly. She is waiting for me to give her answers about Harry. I like her hand on my shoulder, but I need to go home, get back into bed, try to make something out of what's left of the night. "No sense hanging around here," I say apologetically.

"You're running out on me, you bastard."

"Harry's your husband, Sandy. He's only my brother." I leave her to brood over Harry and walk to the physician's parking lot before I remember that I have left my car in the visitor's lot in the rear of the hospital. I pass by a parked motorcycle and envision Harry and Mitzi crashing into the curb, hurtling through the night as if propelled from a circus canon.

Driving home, it begins to rain heavily and I shift into four wheel drive. I like the feel of the gears kicking in and the tires grabbing hold, and think how great a comfort it is to be able to drive a solid car in such inclement weather without fear of winding up in an emergency room, or the graveyard.