

# Chapter 1

I spent every Sunday afternoon for fifteen years doing the New York Times crossword puzzle on the bar at Hal's Place. Hal's was a dive that served liquor to inner city alcoholics. Hal's knew its place in the world. No pool tables, no little wienies from a jar, no video poker. Just cheap strong drinks. Hal's Place was a service to the community. Drunks, drug addicts, hookers, and small time criminals could meet at Hal's, make a deal, find a mate for the night, and drink. People smoked cigarettes and told each other lies. People shot dope in the bathrooms. Hal, a somber gray Santa Claus of a man, presided over it all from his stool by the register. They said he had a forty-five caliber pistol and a baseball bat under the counter. I never saw either one, but I believed they were there.

Winter had come full force to Portland and the rain had begun in earnest. Everything was wet. The incessant drizzle fed a moss that climbed up the walls of buildings and turned the sidewalks pale green. It hung in tendrils from telephone wires and would grow up a man's leg if he stood in one place too long. The wet cold made my fifty-year-old joints ache.

I pushed my empty glass forward to let Hal know I wanted another shot of soda water. He slid off his stool and waddled down the bar. I watched his hands as he filled my glass. His tattoos had turned the color of bruises.

"Leo," he said, "I told a guy you would be here today."

"Who?"

"A guy I know. A biker. He needs a lawyer."

"I can't keep people out of jail, Hal. I'm a probate lawyer. I do wills and shit like that."

"I know what kind of law you do," Hal said, "You think everybody I know is a criminal?"

"That's exactly what I think," I said. He snorted and shuffled off to his stool.

On that rainy Sunday I had been off the booze for a little over three years. Certain irregularities involving client funds had cost me a five year suspension from the practice of law. I drank my way through the suspension driving forklift, then checked myself into rehab. To get the license back I had to complete rehab, cut out the booze, and go to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was the price of being allowed to practice again. Nothing in the deal said I had to quit doing crosswords at Hal's.

Back in the law business, I waded into the world of wills, trusts and discontented heirs. The idea came from a Mormon mortician I met in rehab. When I met him, he'd been kicked out of his profession, kicked out of his marriage and kicked out of his church. In between watching *Days of Wine and Roses* and going to counseling sessions, the two of us schemed ways to make money when we got out. He figured to do low-budget cremations and send the family legal work my way for a modest kickback. I didn't know much about probate at the time, but lawyering ain't rocket science. Doing law for dead people sounded like a quiet practice. No criminals with a nasty tendency to hold a grudge if you didn't win their cases. No fighting over who had to take care of somebody's snotty kids.

I never heard from the Mormon again after getting out of treatment, but with rehab behind me and li-

cense in hand the probate thing still seemed like a good idea. When sober I could make a living doing most any kind of law. The day the Oregon State Bar handed me my ticket back, all I wanted was a safe little office gig doing something that would leave me a few bucks at the end of the month.

"What's this friend of yours want?" I asked.

"Something to do with his old lady," Hal said. "Her father died and she thinks she's entitled."

"They got any money?"

"Can't say for sure, but I don't think this guy would be asking about a lawyer if he couldn't pay." That was a good sign. Most people looking for a lawyer in a place like Hal's were on the scam for freebies. No matter how uneducated, every drunk knows enough Latin to say *pro bono*.

"This guy got a name?" I asked.

"Churley. Churley Dowd."

"Never heard of him," I said.

I kept coming back to law because, when it comes right down to it, the work is easy. I knew from earning a living during my suspensions that painters, fork lift drivers, taxi drivers, and just about everybody works harder than lawyers, but lawyers get paid more. Lawyers don't make money like, movie stars, professional athletes, or dentists, but everything considered, lawyers get paid well enough. Maybe we live in a litigious culture. Maybe lawyers grease the wheels of justice. I couldn't care less. I am a lazy man, and practicing law is the only way I know how to make a living sitting in a chair.

The first time I saw Churley Dowd he was soaked. He came through the door of Hal's and stood inside letting the rain drip off his leathers onto the floor. The

Oregon rains are not kind to motorcycle riders. Churley was a small thin man who even in boots had to stand straight to reach five foot two. He was normal, not a midget or a dwarf, just small.

He took off his wet jacket and laid it on a table by the door. The emblem on the back said "Rebellion Dogs" and had a graphic of a pit bull. The motto at the bottom was "Clean and Sober." He looked at Hal, and Hal nodded toward me.

"Coke please," he said, and took a seat on the stool next to me. Hal popped the tab on a Coke can and set it in front of him. Looking at me, the biker asked, "Are you the lawyer?"

"I'm a lawyer," I said, "Leo Larson."

"Churley Dowd." He stuck out his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Leo."

I gave his hand a shake. It was wet from the rain. "Yeah. Same here," I said.

"What kind of law do you practice?"

"Little of this, little of that. Wills and trusts mostly. What do you need?" Churley took a drink of his Coke. He had the stained hands of someone who works with motors.

"Anything else? Criminal defense? Personal injury?"

"Nope. Just probate. I represent the dead, the nearly dead, and their greedy relatives."

What I told him wasn't strictly true. After law school, when I had a lot more energy, I did criminal defense and learned that I didn't like criminals. My criminal clients were all whiners with some complaint against the world that they just couldn't get over. With the exception of drug dealers, I hated all my criminal clients. I didn't like the drug dealers much

better, but the drug dealers didn't whine, didn't claim they were innocent, and didn't ask for credit. They put cash on the desk and asked only that I do my best. The rest of my criminal clients wanted miracles on a payment plan. After a couple years I was doing all drug dealers, a business that might have worked if I hadn't started taking a lot of fees out in product. My association with drug dealers led to my first suspension and my first trip to rehab.

"Do you help people get inheritances?" Churley asked.

"Yeah, I do," I said.

"How long have you been doing that kind of law?"

"Churley, if there is any cross-examining to be done here, I'd like to be the one doing it."

After dumping criminal law, criminals, and criminality in general, I did what every shingle-hanging lawyer does: personal injury. Doing personal injury law has the same combination of tedium and excitement as playing slot machines. You watch different combinations of the same mind numbing pattern hoping for the fates to grant you that one perfect alignment of facts, law, and insurance coverage that will make you rich. You spend your days listening to stories about how some sad bastard will have to spend twenty years in chiropractic care because there was a broken bottle of ketchup in the middle of the aisle at Safeway. You pay the office rent taking thirty percent of a lot of nickel-and-dime whiplash cases while waiting for the big one. Like addicts dreaming about the big heroin score, personal injury lawyers dream of that one verdict which will pay off the debts and buy a vacation house at the beach. For me and a lot of other lawyers that case never arrived.

I hung in with personal injury for seven years, hating every minute. Then came the problems with the trust account which led to the aforementioned five year suspension and another trip to rehab. Five years was the most they were allowed to dish out. The next time it would be disbarment.

"I'm sorry," Churley said. "I am not trying to be rude. My wife needs a lawyer who knows about inheritances and Hal said you did that kind of thing. I respect Hal and don't mind taking his advice. On the other hand, seeing a lawyer in a place like this does not instill me with confidence." Although oblivious to the ridiculousness of his appearance, the diminutive biker was not as dumb or roughly hewn as I had expected.

"I suppose not," I said.

Churley took another drag on his Coke and eyed my drink. "You a friend of Bill's?" he asked. The question was an insider's way of asking whether I was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I hated the question.

"Yeah. I'm a friend of Bill's," I said.

"Me too."

"I figured that. I saw the jacket."

"How long have you been clean?" he asked.

"Three years."

"That's good," he said. "My wife's name is Daisy. Her father died in January of this year. She is pretty sure she should inherit something, but doesn't know how to go about things."

I put one of my business cards on the table. "Have her call me to set up an appointment."

"She didn't take my name when we got married. Her name is Twill. Daisy Twill."

"I'll remember."

I figured nothing would come of it. People you meet in bars don't call. I watched Churley Dowd put on his wet leathers and head back into the rain. I knew his wife. I hadn't really met her, but I'd spent some time in the same room with her, and once you've been in the same room with Daisy Twill you never forget her.

I rented my office in the Villanova Building in February of 2002, the same month my reinstated license took effect. My landlord was a divorce lawyer who leased the extra offices in his building to lawyers, accountants, and insurance salesmen. The directory by the front door listed me as "Leopold Larson, Attorney at Law."

The Villanova Building was a stone's throw from auto row in a commercial neighborhood known for car lots, gypsies, hookers and cheap rents. My office window looked out on the back lot of Mel's Patriotic Used Cars where there was no credit check for vets. The squat gray Villanova Building housed eight small offices arranged on either side of an unheated hallway. The building always had a vacancy, and the sign visible from the street had a permanent neon announcement of space for rent. The owner of this white collar tenement and occupier of two of the offices was Torkum Masoogian

Torkum Masoogian stood five foot eight and tipped the scales at over three hundred and fifty pounds. Balding, with a gray comb-over that levitated about an inch above his shiny bald head, he ran "Torkum Masoogian and Associates." The phrase "and Associates" in a law firm name usually means the named member is an egomaniacal asshole who

imagines himself a firm, but in reality employs a series of timid, beaten lawyers willing to accept a regular salary in return for doing the actual work in the office and putting up with the owner's abuse. Or at least that's how it worked with Torkum. The sad part was that in a different time and in a different building I'd been the associate of Torkum Masoogian and Associates. So when it came time to hang out my shingle and try the probate thing, it was as natural as rain in Portland for me to look him up.

Torkum made most of his money from being a landlord, but he also ran a moderately successful divorce shop. His shtick was a regular ad in the newspaper announcing, "Divorce Attorney For Women Only." The implication of the ad was that Torkum had some special skill or special sympathy for women in divorce. The truth was that he was a misogynist who'd found women less adept than men at uncovering his incompetence.

Of all the crappy lawyers I'd met over the years, Torkum was the worst. If he ever got the law right in one of his cases it was because his associate had done the work. But when he got a whiff of money, Torkum was tenacious. He clamped on to his cases and never let go. Other lawyers backed off, gave up, abandoned their clients and left the profession—anything—just to get out of a case with Torkum on the other side. He was the kind of man who made other people think *life is too short for this*.

When I walked into Torkum's building in 2002 to ask about a place to rent, he was typing in the reception area. He had wedged his flabby butt onto a wheeled steno chair like Bob Dylan's mattress on a bottle of wine. He always maintained a secretarial

station at the front of his office and used it a lot, but hadn't had a paid secretary since Peggi Iverson, ten years earlier.

"Four hundred dollars a month. First and last up front," he said.

"Nice to see you too, Torkum, after all this time." I stepped up to the counter that separated the small waiting room from the secretarial space.

"I heard you got your ticket back. What are you going to do this time?"

"Probate. Guardianships and conservatorships. Old people law," I said. He stood and waddled across the reception area. The steno chair stayed put proving that it had not been up his ass. Torkum took keys from a drawer and tossed them to me.

"Office 106," he said. "That will be eight hundred bucks." I counted out eight one hundred dollar bills onto the counter, took the keys, and walked down the hall to the office of Leopold Larson. I was in the law business again.

The nice thing about the law is that it doesn't require much start up capital. You pony up for bar dues and you are a phone, word processor, and case of copy paper away from being a professional. I'd managed my forays into and out of the profession with two valuable tools. The first was a long term lease on a ten-by-twenty storage space at Donnelly's Mini-storage where I kept everything from the staple removers to my yellowing college degrees. The second was Peggi Iverson.

Peggi Iverson was the finest legal secretary, receptionist, paralegal, and all purpose assistant in Portland. I met Peggi when we were both working under the miserable fat thumb of Torkum Masoogian. We

both quit Torkum's office on the same day. I quit because he was a miserable fat fuck. She quit, I think, because he tried to stick his hand down her pants. And thus, we ended up together. Peggi had no training, no education, and no social skills. What she did possess, however, was that steel-cold loyalty, born and bred in trailer parks and rent-by-the-week motels, that motivates certain women to stay with lazy drunken men in the face of all adversity and logic. At home in the backstreets of the Heartland Mobile Estates she had given birth to two children by two different fathers. These two criminals in training were the love of her non-working life. When I had work, she was the only other person I would ever allow in my office. Law is a business where, for good reason, members of the staff loathe their bosses. Much evil comes from that. Peggi Iverson kept the evil away from me.

As far as I could tell, Peggi's stout pear-shaped body was completely covered with freckles. In idle moments I had pondered the question of whether her wide butt, the bulwark of her pear shape, was as freckled as her face. Having seen her angry response to Torkum's sexual advances I was careful to stay away from any physical exploration that would have answered the freckle-butt question. That did not mean, however, I wasn't interested. On several occasions over the years she had inadvertently leaned over in a way that allowed me to see a fully freckled breast. She had no more breast than you would find on an obese man, but what she had was covered in freckles.

Peggi lived in a mobile home at the end of Lonely Street. Lonely Street wasn't an official Portland street, but rather the name of the single road that ran down

the middle of the Heartland Mobile Estates, so named because the previous owner had been a bi-polar Elvis fan before he killed himself. Down at the end of Lonely Street, Peggi raised her two children and gossiped across the fence with the kind of men who wear mullets and know how to fix Camaros.

After renting the office from Torkum, I called Peggi. In the past I'd done a little free work for the folks on Lonely Street and had a few favors I could call in. When Peggi put out the word the pickups rolled and in no time the desks, computers, pictures, and other lawyer's tools disappeared from the wet caverns of Donnelli's Mini-storage into office number 106 in the Villanova Building. Peggi, who had been directing traffic at the airport in my absence from the profession, put away her reflective yellow vest and took out her good white blouses. Several years earlier she'd made herself a name tag that said, "Peggi Iverson, Legal Assistant." She took the tag from her jewelry box, affixed it to a pressed blouse, and once again had more than just a job. At the Heartland Mobile Estates, being able to earn a living sitting in a chair was testimony that you had intelligence above that of the common mob.

While Peggi worked on her phone persona talking to the dial tone—"Office of Leopold Larson, may I help you?" "Leopold Larson's office, may I be of assistance." "Leopold Larson, Attorney at Law."—I set about becoming a probate lawyer. When I first fired up the computer at the Villanova building all I knew about probate was what I'd learned while reading *Bleak House* during rehab. To me probate meant rainy London streets, courts of Chancery, and interminably long hearings about the distribution of es-

tates—hearings which eventually resulted in the lawyers getting all the money. Portland had many a rainy street. Courts still sat in equity, that peculiar arm of law which does without juries and the other annoyances of citizen participation. The probate court in downtown Portland was close enough to Chancery for me, and I didn't object to mind-numbing cases about other people's money as long as I got a reasonable chunk of it in the end.

My home life was simple. Three years into my last suspension my third wife got fed up and ran off with my car mechanic. I called up Don Yerke, the titular boss of Lawyers Helping Lawyers, a support group for lawyers recovering from alcoholism. Despite the fact that I was drinking at the time he steered me to a second floor flat in a lime green Victorian down by the Willamette River. The riverfront on the east side of Portland was the warehouse district, but fifty years earlier it been a thriving residential community. Quite a few crumbling Victorian walk-ups still survived in the nooks and crannies after light industry and warehousing had pushed out the families. The place Yerke got me was sandwiched between a mattress factory and a print shop. Out my front bay window I could watch the loading dock of Haven Appliance, a wholesaler of appliance parts, or the comings and goings at Avian House, some sort of fraternal organization that seemed to have run out of members. I liked the apartment mostly for the sounds. I could hear the freeway traffic from my bedroom window. The big trucks arriving early in the morning rattled my windows. I like the sound of cities.

The only other place in my life was Murdock's. Murdock's was the AA group closest to my apartment.

It was Hal's Place without the alcohol. After graduating rehab, I had to find an AA meeting where I could get those slips signed to prove to the Bar that I was staying sober. There were a lot of clean respectable places I could have gone to do that. Murdock's was not one of them.

Murdock's held its meetings in a run down rented storefront about half a mile from my apartment. The group got its name from John Murdock, a man who decades earlier had started the group among the homeless drunks and addicts who slept in the doorways of Portland's skid road.

Murdock's wasn't listed in the official directory of Portland's AA meetings. Real AA in Portland didn't want to admit that the place existed and the people at Murdock's liked it that way. One Saturday in the days after rehab, but before the Bar had given me my license back, I was taking a morning constitutional through the warehouse district and encountered the AA symbol on the door with the words, "This is the door you have been looking for." People were going in so I followed and took a seat in the back. Having been sentenced to AA several different times over the years, I had seen a lot of it. What happened at Murdock's was different.

The AA I had been used to in the church basements and community centers was a cheery AA with a lot of hand holding, hugging, and loving people until they could learn to love themselves. The people at Murdock's weren't like that. The people at Murdock's were mean.

At Murdock's, the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was the meat and potatoes of every meeting. The chairman read aloud from the book and when he got the

urge, would call on someone to speak. The speakers never used "My name is Whatever and I am an alcoholic" for an introduction, and if the speaker bothered to identify him or herself at all there was no chorus of "Hi Whatever" from the audience. People did not applaud. People didn't hug or hold hands. It was a place where you could sit in a crowded room and still be alone.

I went to Murdock's my required three times a week to listen and get my slips signed. By that damp autumn of 2005 I had been going there enough to recognize the regulars and not get glared at when I came in late and took a seat in the back. Most of the people at Murdock's were society's rejects: ex-criminals, ex-cops, and all manner of people who identified themselves by what they used to be. Mental illness was as welcome as alcoholism. The members of Murdock's didn't claim their program could cure depression or schizophrenia, but believed that the mentally ill were better off sober than drunk.

So when Churley Dowd told me his wife's name, I smiled. The time I had spent with Daisy Twill had been in AA meetings at Murdock's.