

# DIRTY OLD TOWN

By Rick Bowes

## Part One: Dream and Memory

At my age, long-gone friends and family, lovers and enemies, old hits and old flops, parade through my dreams. Sometimes that means a jolt of wonder, others a nip of terror. Mostly these are natural dreams, concocted in my subconscious.

Dreams made from magic are rare. A recent one had a familiar setting and time. It was South Boston, which meant that I was five or six, this was 1949/50, and I was in first grade. I walked across a deserted, tar-surfaced D Street Housing Projects playground.

In a classic Boston drizzle, I wore, like a million other American kids, a yellow raincoat and floppy fisherman's hat. Saint Peter's Lithuanian Catholic School in the distance got no closer no matter how I hurried.

Then out of nowhere, coming right at me from that direction, was a somewhat bigger kid. Slit-eyed and with a scary blank face, he was a few strategic months older.

His name back then was Eddie Mackey. Because of how his family was, he wore no raincoat or hat. That gave me a clear view of the bloody cut on his forehead.

Eddie walked right up to me with his eyes empty of expression and an open mouth that got bigger with every step until it filled my vision like an onrushing railroad tunnel.

Before being swallowed, I wondered why the bloody cut I'd given Eddie didn't make him afraid of me.

Hit with this enigma, the dream wobbled and dissolved like the contrivance it was. Opening my eyes, I found myself in a Greenwich Village late-winter dawn.

Sleep-addled, I remembered my grandmother telling me that even a trained sorcerer couldn't send a dream from far away. Eddie Mackey calls himself Ed Mack now. In the grey morning hour, he had passed near enough to my apartment to plant that dream in my head.

Staggering around the kitchen, I made toast and brewed the same dark, longleaf tea my grandmother once did. The scent evoked a thin, white-haired figure, a seeming wisp of a woman. Only God knows all the tea she must have brewed.

Whenever I think of her, I hear the crowd at Fenway Park roar as Ted Williams lines one into the stands.

Knowing I wouldn't get back to sleep, I turned to the story I was writing for an anthology. It concerned a man in late middle age who hears Time's Winged Chariot clattering behind him as he jogs, climbs stairs, or peddles a stationary bike in his relentless attempt to stay one step ahead of Death.

This story had gone through all the writer's preliminary stages: inspiration, wonder, disappointment, and the decision to retire from writing and live in a remote cabin.

That morning I found a plot twist. My character turned expecting to see bearded Chronos with an hourglass in one hand and chariot reins in the other. Instead, he found a guy wearing a suit and badge. With eyes cold blue and amused, an Irish cop offered him a chance to sign away a chunk of his worldly wealth in return for a decade more of life.

The adult Eddie Mackey was the model for the cop. I've used him in stories and scripts as characters ranging from amusingly dishonest to satanic. It bothers him a bit.

He, in turn, knows it bothers me that he's approached on the street by people asking for his autograph. Mostly, my life hasn't been bad. But I'm asked for autographs only at my book signings. He chose the actor's life and shortened his name to Ed Mack while I chose to be a writer.

Intruding on these thoughts was an email from Eddie/Ed reminding me of an appointment that evening.

He had worshipped my grandmother and thinking of her made me remember that Red Sox spring training was under way. My mother's mother was mad about the sport. She gave me a bat blessed by a baseball-loving priest when we moved to D Street Housing Project. Smaller even than a little league model, it was a perfect fit for a five-year-old.

She adored every aspect of baseball. I remember us stopping at a corner lot to watch a dozen kids play on a crude diamond adjoining an outfield paved with broken bricks.

Her sons all played for their schools and in the Twilight Leagues when they were young. I've wondered if she got them involved so she could watch. My uncles gave her a

TV, one of the first I ever saw. She followed the ever-failing Red Sox with a fanatic's devotion, even taking out her rosary beads to pray for Johnny Pesky to lay down a bunt or Mel Parnell to toss a double-play pitch.

Some said they'd seen her pray for the Yankee's plane to crash on its way to Boston. I don't believe that. Not even her magic couldn't help the Sox.

A few days before Eddie's dream, I'd been a guest on a fiction podcast where the hostess asked about old St. Patrick's Days in Boston. And I let a fine McGabber flow right out of me.

"McGabber" is the name I gave early on to my tales told with full Celtic twists and turns. From schoolyards to bars, the storyteller was still welcome in Celtic Boston. It began:

*"I remember as a little kid—it was maybe 1950—being on the third-floor porch of a three-decker watching the Parade in South Boston with all my mother's family, the aunts and uncles and cousins and relatives visiting from Ireland. And most of all, my grandparents!"*

*"I remember my uncles shouting greetings down to people in the street and people on the ground shouting back. The Saint Patrick's Day Parade only passes through South Boston, the traditional Irish neighborhood."*

*"At the head of the parade as it wound through the streets were these amazing old steam-powered fire engines that kept breaking down on the hills. So the bands and*

*marching contingents would come to a halt and march in place until somewhere in the distance the engines started up again.*

*“Politicians were thick on the ground. I saw James Michael Curley, a Boston legend who had lately been elected mayor while in jail. His open car stopped down the street from us; and a little girl in a white communion dress came out, curtsied, and presented him with a bouquet of roses.*

*“He doffed his high silk hat, bowed low, and in his great, rolling Shakespearean actor voice said something like, ‘It’s an honor and a privilege to accept these flowers from so lovely a young child of Ireland.’*

*“The parade started up again and Curley’s car rolled forward only to stop right below us when a barefoot woman with a kerchief on her head ran out to sweep the street in front of his honor’s vehicle. Curley rose again, bowed, and presented her with the bouquet. Holding it aloft, she danced a jig.*

*“My grandfather walked to the railing and raised his glass to the mayor who waved back.*

*My grandmother, her arm around me shook her head and murmured, “He’s been carrying on like this for much too long.” And I wasn’t sure if she meant the mayor, her husband, or both.*

*“Curley rolled on and the barefoot woman disappeared somewhere and maybe put on her shoes. A brass band marched by. And right behind it was a bunch of kids from the Boys’ Club wearing baseball sweaters and caps and kind of marching in step.*

*Tagging behind this formation were kids who had joined along the parade route and who marched in no order whatsoever.*

*“Right then, the parade halted again and looking down I found two familiar faces, practically the same face twice. Staring up at me were Eddie and Joe Mackey.”*

The podcast hostess looked concerned. The anecdote appeared to be going out of control. “I mention the Mackey Brothers,” I found myself explaining, “Because Eddie Mackey became Ed Mack whom you may know as Jack Scanty on *Dirty Old Town*.”

And the hostess, wide-eyed, said, “You grew up with him?”

It’s a sad age, but a cable TV crime show with an actor who’s just won an award gets recognition no writer ever will. I closed my interview by inventing a childhood friendship for Eddie and me.

There was more to that distant St. Patrick’s Day. The Mackeys and I stared at each other but none of us waved or smiled, or shouted over the noise.

Eddie was in first grade with me and a constant torment. Also, I’d been pushed around more than once by his brother, Joey, who was five years older and a head or two taller than I was.

My grandmother’s blue eyes missed none of this.

She looked over the railing. The Mackeys backed off, broke eye contact, and melted into the crowd as the parade started up again.

“Your friends?” my grandmother asked.

I shook my head. “They’re in my school.” I wasn’t going to say that if I had any school friends, it wouldn’t be them.

But then she ran her hand along the top of my crew cut as if she was stroking a cat. Something unlocked inside me and words rushed out.

“Eddie always follows me home and tries to trip me and makes fun of me. Joey’s even worse. He kicks kids, steals stuff. I have to hide from them after school. Once they chased me right up the stairs in my building, tried to push their way into the apartment. Joey got his head in and looked around and said I was weird because we had so many books. Then they heard my mother asking who was there and he ducked out.”

Telling my grandmother about my troubles and fears broke the first law I’d learned after I was allowed out to play with other kids: you never told adults stuff like this.

But it felt like just seeing us had revealed to her everything there was to know about the Mackeys and me.

When I said, “He gives me bad dreams,” she nodded and I knew she understood. That evening in a quiet corner of her living room, she taught me a short invocation. She said it was like a prayer and it began, “Open and open the door that is locked,” then used words in the old language. I was to recite this only if I was in danger. She told me what would happen after I did.

When we moved to D Street my parents maybe decided the local public elementary school wasn’t good or wasn’t near enough. Or maybe as former actors, left-wing Catholics, and proud eccentrics determined not to raise an ordinary child, they thought it too mundane.

So while most of the kids in the Projects went there, I was sent to Saint Peter's, a Lithuanian Catholic school on the fringes of the neighborhood.

The nuns were bilingual. Lots of kids were recent refugees from Europe and still learning English, so classes were taught in both languages. My parents were amused when I came home knowing Lithuanian words and even a song or two. I spoke so easily and so well that the fact I had trouble writing my own name didn't seem to them a big deal.

School was a path I traveled on my own. My parents read me *New Yorker* stories from *The Thurber Carnival* at bedtime, but I had to live my life in a place where few other families had a book.

Among the Projects kids at St. Peter's were Eddie Mackey and his brother Joey. Later I learned Joey had been thrown out of public school and their mother wanted to keep them together.

Life was excitement tinged with terror. Kids were always fighting; sometimes rocks got thrown. Eventually D Street became a famous hellhole. But briefly it was shinier and newer than anything else in the city.

I was a kid who saw or imagined magic. The eyes on the statues in the church followed me when I walked past them. I told my teacher this in class one day. The nun just smiled but other kids laughed.

Eddie Mackey stood in my way after school. "You seeing statues looking at you?" he asked. He seemed serious. But when I said, "yes," he followed me home telling everyone that statues looked at me.



## Part Two: The Song of the Bat

I remembered all this and knew I'd be seeing Eddie that evening. Suze, with whom I've been close since back when she was Steve and we were an item, stopped by around noon and we went to Caffè Reggio for lunch. Suze knows Eddie Mackey/Ed Mack. She told me, "He called last night and said things were coming together for a movie about your grandfather."

"He's talked about that for decades," I said.

"What was your grandfather like?" Suze asked. "You must have a McGabber about him."

And out it came.

*"I believe I could be the last person left on Earth who will be able to say he voted for Harry Truman for President. I was four in 1948 when my grandfather brought me to a polling place in South Boston, took my hand, guided it over a ballot, and made the letters of my name on it.*

*"His friends, the ward heelers who ran the polls, were amused' said, things like, 'Ah, you're doing a fine deed, Michael! Raising the boy right!'*

*"So I cast my vote for Truman, a Democrat loyal to friends no matter what trouble they got into, and not a New York aristocrat looking down his nose at Irishmen sullied by their work in the sootier aspects of Democratic politics.*

*“My grandfather’s magic in all its variety is hard to capture. I stayed with my grandparents a lot as a child when my mother and father had theatrical gigs, when my brother was born, and sometimes for reasons that weren’t explained, so I knew them well.*

*“My grandfather hadn’t been the best of fathers by any means. After he was gone, I heard tales of how, not once but on two separate occasions when my mother and her siblings were kids, he came home drunk on Christmas Eve and threw the tree, with all its decorations, out the window.*

*“But for me he was wondrous, taking me shopping once when I’d had a bad day at school and buying me a hat that was a small version of the one he himself wore.*

*“A mercurial soul, he was a motorman on streetcars (but seemingly not all the time) from the 1920’s on. At one point back then he somehow was well-to-do, had six houses and several cars. It was then they called him ‘The Millionaire Motorman.’*

*“The money appeared out of nowhere, to hear his children tell it. Then, like the fairy gold it may have been, everything was gone and he was broke with nothing left but a taste for drink and a rollicking bad temper. Only his wife’s charm and her magic saved his life when debts came due and he couldn’t pay.*

*“By the time I knew him, in the years when I thought he was a god, he had moderated his drinking and in the way of Irish men was a wonderful father to any boy who was not actually his son.*

*“A walk to the corner store could be like something out of a tale. ‘Irene, the Queen of Shopkeepers,’ he’d tell the mean little woman who owned the variety store on*

*the corner. Years later, I found out she ran the numbers in that neighborhood. And only his magic made her smile.*

*“All I knew was that he’d say about me, ‘He’s a remarkable boy. There’s nothing in the world that he cannot do.’ And she’d give me a Popsicle.*

*“One time on the sidewalk, he waved his hand and seemingly out of the very cement popped a tall, drooping shambles of a man. ‘Peter Maguire, as honest and fit as any who has ever breathed,’ said my grandfather, ‘what do you think of my grandson, Pete?’*

*“‘Looks like he could be a fine young man unless you’re raising him to be a hellion like yourself.’*

*“‘He favors my wife and his mother, for which I hope he’s as thankful as he should be. Now, might I ask you what you make of the doings yesterday in that fifth race at Suffolk Downs?’ Then they both stepped away from me and whispered for a moment.*

*“Before I could get impatient, he’d be back at my side, gesturing at an elf-like man in a suit. ‘There he is, Spencer MacGriffin, a lawyer no bigger than yourself and rich. But you’ll outreach him. There’s nothing in the world at which you won’t succeed.’*

*“And he’d pop into a shop and buy me a clip-on tie with shamrocks on it. Part of his magic was his ability to see the world at an angle no other mortal knew.”*

Because Suze is also Eddie’s friend, I didn’t tell her about the day Eddie Mackey entered the world of my grandfather and me. At age six, it was a dark calamity.

I thought at the time that perhaps my grandfather was dropping by to visit relatives. But I've come to realize that an encounter with Eddie and me was why he was wandering along D Street that afternoon.

Eddie was trying to get my attention by stepping on my heels as we walked. Back then, I thought my grandfather didn't understand the situation. I see now that he read us completely and chose for his own reasons to regard us as friends.

Grasping each of us by a shoulder (no sissy holding hands with him), he guided us across the street while talking to Eddie. "So Mackey's the name? There's a Joe Mackey, played baseball with my boys." He gave a theatrical pause and stared like something had just occurred to him. "That would be your father?"

Eddie nodded a bit hesitantly. I understand now that he hardly ever saw his old man, what with the guy's time in prison and sobering up in hospitals.

"And from the looks of you, I'll lay money you play ball yourself." And my grandfather was off talking about Eddie and the accomplishments he'd just invented for this kid he was maybe seeing for the first time. Eddie gave a little smile, which I'd never seen him do.

The Millionaire Motorman said, "I well remember your grandmother, Eileen Mackey. She spoke to saints and they listened. You are a child of a magic line." Then he poked Eddie in the stomach and asked him about his grandmother and how she was.

The hard-eyed kid turned into a giggling little boy as my grandfather bought us not just lollipops but all-day suckers, with extra ones to stick in our pockets. And I remember my disappointment at having to share him with my enemy.

The day after the one with my grandfather changed Eddie's life and mine.

We were in class ignoring each other. The nun who taught first grade also taught kindergarten in the same room and switched from the one to the other and back again. She'd pull Lithuanian and American kids through Dick, Jane, and Sally in English one minute and teach Lithuanian songs to children even smaller than I was the next.

Was she a good teacher? Probably. But overworked. She was nice to me, ignored my trouble with writing words because of how I could talk.

That afternoon, without warning though our teacher must have known, a knock came at the door. She opened it and into the classroom strode Sister Superior with an even more terrible expression on her face than usual. With her were three boys and three girls, all in tears. Thus began a nightmare.

These were older students, nine years old—ten, even! The girls were dressed in the boys' coats and pants. And the boys were all in dresses—total humiliation! Sister Superior told us that they were being punished because the boys had been peeking into the girls' bathroom window and the girls had found this funny and they'd all been laughing when they were caught.

I understood none of this, but God, It seemed, was quite angry. They all had to say how sorry they were and then were herded sobbing out of the room and down the hall to be shown to every class.

As they left, I realized one of the boys was Joey Mackey. I glanced around and saw Eddie staring after his brother with tears in his eyes. He turned, saw me watching him cry, and shot me an angry look. I worried about after school.

But when that came, Joey Mackey and the ones caught with him, now back in their own clothes, were getting jeered at and punched by kids even older than they were. Eddie, a loyal little brother, walked with Joey, tried to put his arm around him, was shaken off but stared defiantly at the world.

That night, I had dark dreams. In one I saw myself in a dress with arrows sticking out of me. I'd seen a statue full of arrows in church and had thought the loincloth, which was all the saint wore, was a dress.

Then I was in a hall in my school. Students, priests, and nuns all around me pointed and laughed. I realized I was naked.

Awake, I kept getting reminded of the dreams. On a living room wall in our apartment was a double photo of my mother as Viola in a production of *Twelfth Night*. In one shot she was dressed as a man. In the other she was a woman.

Joey Mackey didn't come back to St. Peter's. Eddie was very quiet and we avoided each other. My dreams began to fade.

A few days later on my way home from school, I saw the Mackey brothers on the other side of D Street. Joey crossed with a scary smile. Eddie followed him, looking unhappy.

I froze where I was. Then, in my mind, I heard the words my grandmother taught me. I whispered "Open and open the door that is locked," and stumbled over a couple of the old words. But suddenly I was inside Joey, feeling the anger flowing through him. He wanted to smash someone and I saw myself, small and scared, and realized I saw this through his eyes. Then I remembered him standing in tears, wearing a dress. He caught

my memory and froze. This was his nightmare. Rage turned to fear. Joey backed away fast, turned, and ran. Eddie hesitated then followed his brother.

That Saturday, I was playing by myself in the open space outside my building. A waterlogged copy of the Boston American was my home plate. I tossed a stone up in the air, swung the blessed baseball bat and missed it repeatedly.

The bat had taken lots of wear. There was a crack along its barrel. Around me, women hung their wash on clotheslines in a chain-link-fenced area. Men headed to the bars and a great roiling mass of kids played, screamed, teased, punched, cried.

Suddenly, I saw Eddie angry and coming at me. I backed halfway up the front steps of my building whispering, “Open and open” and the rest of it.

Then I was in his head, saw myself, bat in hand, felt his anger and bewilderment. He’d tried to be friends by making me tough like Joey had done with him. He’d thought his brother was a giant until I somehow made Joey back down. Now Joey had run away from home.

Eddie was grief-crazed but brave. He hurled himself at me then realized I was inside him and scarier even than Sister Superior.

I had my own fear and anger to deal with. When his sneakers hit the bottom step, I swung my bat and caught him just above his right eye.

The flimsy bat broke but Eddie staggered backward and blood trickled from his forehead. He touched it and saw blood on his hand. I lost contact as he ran away.

Soon after this, my mother appeared. She had seen a boy run past her, bleeding. With no idea of what had happened, she was horrified. I was grabbed and hauled up to the apartment before harm could befall me. The bat got left behind.

She told my father, “It was awful: a little boy with blood streaming down his face.” She repeated the story on the phone to her mother and sisters. Never did it occur to her that I might have done the deed.

I worried that she’d find out, but her contacts with people in the Projects were tenuous. And Eddie, years later, explained all the reasons why his mother had no interest in bringing her family to the attention of the authorities.

My grandmother was another matter. A few days later, she met me coming out of school and we walked amid kids and talked baseball.

Eddie, very subdued and with a bandage on his forehead, tried to avoid looking my way.

□ My grandmother asked if I was practicing with the bat.

“It broke,” I said. Just that, but something in my voice, or my involuntary glance at Eddie and her own uncanny instinct, told her more. Eddie’s return gaze was miserable, like we’d been friends and weren’t now. As at the parade, I believe my grandmother saw the shape of all that had passed between us.

She didn’t get angry, just looked at me and nodded her understanding. “You learned all that poor bat could teach you,” she said. Her smile was a bit sad.

When Eddie turned toward his building, she stopped me and went to him, put her hands on his shoulders. I thought he’d pull away from her but she whispered something

and hugged him and he held still. She asked after his mother and grandmother, said he was a fine boy. His eyes teared and he ducked to hide that.

She summoned me over. Neither of us wanted to face the other. My grandmother made us shake hands. Even without magic, I felt his awe as he stared at her.

“You’re neither of you ordinary boys. Each will need the other,” she told us.

Before he went home, she kissed him and said, “You have a fine spirit. I’ll visit you and your mother.” He walked away glancing back at her.

When he was gone, she put her arm around my shoulders and said, “You should be friends with Eddie. He isn’t well cared for.”

But I felt cheated by her paying attention to him. It was like he had stolen both my grandparents from me.



### Part Three: Dreams in the Night

Shortly after that, my family moved from D Street to a leafy neighborhood in Dorchester where we had a backyard and all the parks had baseball diamonds. I saw our move as a miracle caused by my slugging Eddie. My life got better. Sadly, I forgot any Lithuanian I may have known, but the saints in the huge church we went to never looked my way.

Once in a while over the years I would dream of a streetcar all lighted up and rolling through the night. And the Millionaire Motorman at the controls smiled in my direction. Or I’d see a young girl walking a rocky road beside a gray sea and wake up remembering my grandmother.

Looking back, I connect those dreams with Eddie Mackey.

Many things changed. When I was nine, my grandmother died and I cried my eyes out. A few years later, my grandfather, who'd become quite distant, disappeared back to Ireland where he died.

In time I found out I was gay, drank illegally, went to college, had boyfriends, did drugs, and moved to Manhattan. A quarter-century and more since I'd last seen Eddie, I was writing plays that got readings but not productions. For money I taught Drama Lit at the New School and worked the door at Manland Disco on Christopher Street.

My ability to overawe belligerent customers despite my size gave me a certain cred. But the knowledge lurked that I was misusing my grandmother's gift.

In the wake of our affair, Steve/Suze and I remained fast friends. One night, she insisted there was a show I needed to see and took me to a small, worn-down theater way gone on the Hudson Waterfront. Sometimes it was a shadow play with silhouette figures. Sometimes it was actors in spotlights being sinister pantomime whores and street toughs.

Lenya sang about Mack The Knife on a scratchy old record while at stage-left, a male hand held a stiletto to a silhouette woman's throat. A shadow dog leaped for the hand but its teeth snapped shut on nothing. The silhouette woman took that opportunity to escape into the dark.

Stage right, under a street lamp, was a guy hiding the blade in his jacket. The silhouette woman saw him and drew back. The guy stepped forward, hands stuck in his front pockets, Mack the Knife with a South Boston strut and a smile on his face that I recognized. It was the same one Eddie wore when he stepped on my heels.

There were more silhouettes and sinister moments. But once I saw Eddie, I paid attention to nothing else.

After the show, he stepped out the stage door into a back alley. In an instant, he spotted me waiting and asked in the thickest of Boston accents, “Why are you hiding in the dark?”

We hugged, which surprised me as I did it. Over the years, I’d mostly thought about Eddie when I wrote him into scenes as a mean kid, a minor devil.

Now with a Brando-like dinged nose and intense eyes, he was compelling. “They told me you were in this town and for once they were right,” he said. This time the voice had only the faintest residue of Boston.

Suze had set this up at Eddie’s request. We three and a few people from the show stopped at a waterfront bar where hard-boiled eggs were the only solid food.

I filled in my life since we’d last seen each other. Words spilled out of Eddie. He said, “You need to talk after you do pantomime.” He’d already appeared in a couple of Off-Off-Broadway shows that weren’t much reviewed.

“With ’Nam after a two-year hitch, you’re entitled to be crazy if you made it back,” he said. “I did some rehab out in California. But there’s no therapy like acting. I ate it up.”

Eddie was glad to find me. Especially since Suze had let him know my latest romance had moved out of my under-heated apartment on Avenue B. Suddenly, it was Eddie and me.

Late one night, we lay stoned on the busted furniture, listening to the fire and police sirens, someone screaming on a roof. And he said, "I envied you your family. Your parents at the sight of a little blood- not even your blood- moved out of D Street and found a much nicer place to live. Great people! When I was maybe eight, your grandfather told me they were actors. Until then I never knew the figures on TV were actual people."

"Yours wasn't like my family with a father who couldn't have picked me out of a police line-up and a mess of a mother who'd been raised by a professional informant. Tell people you grew up in D Street and they stare at you like you sang with the Pogues and ran guns for the IRA.

"I lived in that hellhole for another fourteen years as the Projects went down the toilet. Vietnam saved me. "My father's dead, my mother's drinking herself to death, my brother's disappeared."

I gave a questioning look at the mention of Joey.

"After the incident with you, he ran away, kept doing that, got institutionalized, got out, and vanished."

I winced and he chuckled. "Believe me, I understand why you did it. Seeing him come apart made me crazed."

He shook his head, stared off. Some years later, I saw the same action and glance when he starred in a revival of Eugene O'Neil's *The Iceman Cometh*.

We talked about my grandparents and I found he'd thought about them more than I had. Eddie said, "I'll never forget them. Your grandmother was a magic woman. My

own grandmother, Eileen Mackey, had sinister magic. I think she used it on my mother and Joey. I hated her. Your grandfather knew Eileen, talked about her that time he bought us lollipops.”

I told him, “When my grandmother died, one of my uncles talked to me about his mother and said, ‘There would be a moment when you were a kid where she’d give a look that said, *“You are as good now as you’ll get to be and that will be enough for you to survive.”*”

I looked up and Eddie had tears in his eyes. Real ones, I think. We got it on that night. But it was curiosity and neither knowing anyone like the other that drove us. Our relationship was a narrow, rocky path.

A few times back then I had wonderful dreams about my grandparents and thought it was because Eddie had jogged my memory.

One night I read him a McGabber I’d just written.

*“My grandparents were born in the nineteenth century and grew up on the bleak, remote Aran Islands with Gaelic as their first language. I don’t remember them speaking to each other all that much.*

*“But when they’d be talking in English about someone who was misbehaving and remembered I was present, they’d slip into their first language, laughing and bright-eyed. It’s the only time I remember them being close. Maybe it was a reminder of their lives when they were young. Even now when I hear Gaelic, I connect it with inappropriate gossip.*

*“Last year I was invited onto a radio show about Irish writers, was asked about my granduncles Liam and Tom, both of whom wrote. What I talked about mostly was their sister, my grandmother, this lady I’d loved as a child.*

*“In the 1930s, her brother Tom became an editor of the Daily Worker, the New York Communist newspaper. Her other brother, Liam O’Flaherty, is better known. His novel The Informer was made into a famous movie and a couple of not-so-famous ones. In his time he was a welcome figure in the Soviet Union.*

*“We had Liam’s collected short stories around the house. One that intrigued me later when I began writing was about a boy, clearly himself, living in those bleak islands. Then his older sister returns from America to visit her family. And she is a magic creature for the boy who has not yet ventured away from home. She touches and twists her younger brother’s imagination, makes him long for the wider world.*

*“And her influence didn’t stop then. There’s a family legend involving the three of them and the Palmer Raids. After World War One, Palmer, the U.S. Attorney General, believed that communists had infiltrated the USA during the war to organize a revolution. His raiders traveled everywhere hunting commies.*

*“They got to Boston where her brothers Tom and Liam, a pair of Reds, were crashing at their sister’s place. Somehow my grandmother barred the way, possibly cast a spell on the raiders long enough that her brothers got out the windows, onto the fire escape and away.”*

Eddie listened, fascinated. When I finished, he applauded and said, “My ambition is to play a rogue who has a bit of magic and a smile. I’ll use a big dose of our grandfather.”

Before I could ask him what this “our” was about, he said, “That old guy had charm I’ve never seen anyone come close to touching, onstage or off. But could his wife or anyone else but small boys really trust him?”

“What do you mean?”

“In your McGabber, how did the authorities know the location of the red brothers?”

“Anonymous informers, the Irish curse,” I said. “Kind of ironic: Liam is mainly remembered for writing a novel about an informer.”

“Maybe not so anonymous. When the Millionaire Motorman said about Eileen Mackey, ‘She spoke to saints and they listened,’ he invented as lilted a euphemism for, ‘police stooge’ as anyone ever has.

“My family had its stories, too. In them grandmother Mackey snitched for the cops. She had the power to pull secrets out of any man living or dead. Especially a man eight years younger than his wife.”

My grandfather was that much younger than my grandmother. It had occurred to me that, like her brothers, he’d been captivated by this woman back from America.

“Unfaithful, maybe,” I said. “But turning relatives in? That wasn’t him.”

“Agreed. But he was probably sick of her commie relatives getting all her attention. And you know that without a fresh scandal and someone to tell it to, he’d have

died. He encountered Eileen Mackey— more than encountered as she told it. And being who he was, he couldn't keep a secret.

“After you moved away, I saw him a lot. He let me know I was his grandson. There's a play, possibly a movie here. If somebody with financing was interested, you could write it. I could play our grandfather.”

When Eddie talked about this, I ignored him, refused to discuss his idea for a drama about my family that I hardly ever saw. Eddie took to calling us cousins. “You two getting your incest zest on?” Suze asked.

He had a nice review in an Off-Broadway play set in Irish Hell's Kitchen. Then, one day he came home looking stunned.

“I got a part in this TV movie that's shooting in New York. I play a psycho. No lines, just crazy face and screen time.”

As I recall, I congratulated him. But it ground my insides. He was much better at what he did than I was at whatever I was doing. We mostly weren't speaking by the time another call came and he went out to Hollywood.

Just before he left, I dreamed that my grandfather looked down with a serious face I'd never seen, and spoke to a maybe nine-year-old Eddie who looked up at him wide-eyed. “A joke or a song will win you a smile and a kiss. But send someone a dream like this one I'm showing you and it will be with them forever.”

I remembered the dream when I awoke, and as was promised it's been with me ever since. When I opened my eyes, Eddie was there, smiling and ready to leave. For

some time I'd wanted him gone but suddenly I didn't want that. On parting, he said, "I've found no others like us."



#### Part Four: Dirty Old Town, I Want You Back



Over the years, Eddie Mackey became Ed Mack, had a fine career as a character actor in movies, played killers with a touch of poetry, cops with faulty consciences.

He did stage work, made it a point to return to New York every couple of years. Eddie would mention the script and I'd ignore him.

On a visit in the '90's, his marriage to the actress Terri Javier had gone bust when her career eclipsed his, and I'd broken up with a club owner who loved a younger guy.

"Nothing else we've tried works," he said. "But we could be brothers." I smiled and found a bit of comfort there.

A few years ago, we had a great nostalgic afternoon at an outdoor café on Central Park. He told me, "Sometimes in LA, I'll get a flash of light in the corner of my eye and I turn and catch a glimpse of your grandmother."

And I said, "My mother told me that my grandmother once said that she'd married her husband for his dreams and nothing more."

###

A few weeks ago, Ed announced he'd be back in town. The e-mail this morning, after his dream, begged me to attend an event in the evening.

It started at seven with me seated in a theater at Transvision Cable's Columbus Circle offices. This was a press event staged for New York's publicity machine. The occasion was the third-season rollout of the Emmy Award-winning series *Dirty Old Town*.

As you've doubtless seen or heard, DOT spins a fictional version of Boston crime a couple of generations back. The world is one of aging neighborhoods, corrupt cops, the code of silence, and the rise of Whitey Bulger.

Within a few episodes of its initial season, DOT returned to me the city in which I grew up. I watch it alone because it makes me cry.

In front of a big screen, a panel of directors, actors, producers, cameramen, and techies sat facing us. The former Eddie Mackey was at the far end of the row.

I attempted to catch his eye but couldn't. Using my magic didn't feel appropriate. On the screen, MTA cars rattled along elevated tracks in a landscape of three-decker houses. A producer described the pains that went into bringing elevated trains and the old low-rise "city skyline back to life through the miracle of computer animation.

Location scouts talked about finding just the right corner store to use as the front for a numbers parlor. A stretch of shore in New Jersey became Revere Beach in its full, seamy glory.

We viewed dingy apartments and rainy shots of Dorchester Boulevard dolled up with old bar signs and seventies cars. There were snowy views of everything from the State House to the dog track at Wonderland. "No need to fake the snow," a director testified.

The visuals ended with a guy shot and falling headfirst over the wooden railing of a third-floor porch.

Most of the panel had California sheen. Eddie was also well turned out, but his dented nose and his haircut would not have looked incongruous back in our Boston. His eyes were alive but a bit remote. They never focused on me.

The producer introduced the panel in turn. Each had a little something to say about their place in the series. Eddie came last despite his Golden Globe Award.

When the producerit came to him, he said, “Last and foremost, our very own Ed Mack who as Jack Scanty, ‘The Repairman,’ takes the blood and tears of a city and turns them into leprechaun gold.”

The Repairman was on-screen in a scene from the first episode of the upcoming season. It was set in a mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century den: sports trophies on shelves, a stag’s head on the wall along with photos of boxers, racehorses, and naked ladies. A man, presumably the late owner, sat pitched forward in a swivel chair. His face was flat on a desk blotter, which had a dark, growing stain.

Wearing gloves, Scanty flipped the man’s hand off the phone he’d reached for. “What misunderstanding made him think he could make a call?” Scanty asked someone unseen. That absence allowed Eddie to make each viewer feel they were the one being addressed.

The Repairman went through drawers, pulled out an envelope, and said, “Jesus! With a wad like this, I’d have put distance between myself and the scene of my felonies.”

He tossed the envelope to the unseen accomplice and went back to rifling the desk. The actor famously improvised his soliloquies. Scanty spoke pure Boston with the slightest suggestion of a brogue.

He said, “My early life got saved by a mug so Irish, no one in the city could identify me from among the other ten thousand young Micks up to no good and wearing the same face I sported.

I was slick, I was hard, I was so dumb I’m amazed I’m still alive.” He shrugged, half-smiled, and was working on the combination lock of a safe as the scene ended.

Hardened media members broke into applause.

The scene roused my nostalgia in a couple of ways. The den reminded me of a certain Beacon Hill sugar daddy. And Eddie sounded a bit like my grandfather.

The actor stood and said to the audience, “Let me tell you a little story.” I sat stunned as he launched into a McGabber I wrote years ago and forgot.

*“I lived in the D Street Projects in South Boston right at the start. A few years later was a different story, but at first it had its share of cops and firemen and GI’s back from the war.*

*“My Uncle Bill, the cop, lived there with his wife, over near Saint Peter’s Church, and they were expecting their first kid. One day when maybe my parents were busy, I was sent over to hang around with my Aunt Claire. Uncle Bill came home in uniform for lunch and brought his partner Kelly with him.*

*“My uncle went into the kitchen and was talking to my aunt. I was in the living room and they were speaking in whispers, arguing. Probably it was stuff I shouldn’t have*

*had to hear. Kelly, who was this big, beefy guy with a constant half-smile, maybe thought to distract me. He was sitting on the couch and had taken off his belt and holster, laid them beside him. I stared wide-eyed and he took the police special out and nodded. I came forward and he handed it to me butt-first. I held it with both hands but I was just six years old and the weight carried my arms down.*

*“The barrel was pointed at the floor and I was ready to drop it when Uncle Bill came in with two bottles of Narragansett. ‘You emptied it, right?’ he asked. Kelly slapped his forehead and my uncle relieved me of the gun, looked back to see if my aunt had caught any of this.*

*“If she had, no word of this was said and it was never referred to again. In retrospect, this could have been an exciting day for Mrs. Callahan downstairs if I’d dropped the piece and a bullet had gone through her ceiling.”*

There was some laughter and applause and seemingly for the first time, Eddie spotted me, came down off the stage, and took my arm. As I stood, he said, “Those words come from this cousin of mine, a great writer who’s working on a project with me.” People looked my way. The producer shook my hand briefly.

We descended in a crowded elevator. Passengers gave sidelong glances at Ed Mack. I thought of the sleep I’d lost and the way he’d appropriated my story.

“Bill was my uncle,” I said. “Did you ever meet him?” Hearing myself, I sounded like I was six.

Looking a bit amused, Eddie said. “I know a place right around the corner.”

The time of dark Manhattan bars where guys got loaded and sad is gone. We settled into a nicely lit, quiet place. Eddie ordered a Jameson and water, I got an ice tea.

A couple of patrons were clearly trying to remember why he looked so familiar. The bartender whispered the reason. Ed Mack pretended to ignore all that.

Smiling like a bully he murmured, "I keep thinking of you walking to school in that yellow raincoat."

That dream had violated an unspoken truce: we didn't impose our magic on each other. He was taunting me and I was pissed enough to whisper my grandmother's invocation.

Inside him, I found a jumble of memories along with heavy doses of anger and fear. At the center of all this, I saw a doctor diagnose him with stomach cancer. Through Ed's eyes, I watched my expression change from anger to shock. I broke the connection between us.

"I'm too big a coward to actually say the C word," he said and looked ashamed. "Please keep this to yourself. The producers of *Dirty Old Town* are about to back the movie. Our grandfather is a part you were born to write and I was born to play."

Eddie wasn't through with me. Suddenly I saw the two of us as kids on a crowded Subway platform. A great roar came out of the tunnel and a giant gold chariot pulled by tigers appeared. Our grandfather in his motorman cap was in the driver's seat. The crowd parted to let us climb aboard and with a crack of the whip, off we went.

"Please say you'll help me," he asked. Stunned, I nodded. "Sweet dreams to us both," he said and departed before I could speak.



Part Five: "The Last McGabber."



*"With dreams and disease, Eddie won me over. In the next few weeks, he sent shots of twentieth-century Irish Boston. It was black and white parades, first communions, barrooms, and wakes. Surprised at how much I missed a world of which I'd seen nothing more than parting glances, I wrapped a story line around my grandparents and two small boys in 1950 South Boston and threw in flashbacks.*

*"I got clips of the film as it was shot and saw Ed Mack as our grandfather in all his glory and wearing a hat as no one else could.*

*"We talked often by phone. 'We may be disgusting old men but in our youth we were touched by magic,' he told me. 'I doubt if there will be any more like us when we go.' And the voice was so close to our grandfather's that I shivered.*

*"He came to New York after shooting was finished and there was talk of taking the film to Sundance and other festivals. It was a lovely spring day and we walked through the streets with him speaking in a brogue, waving a walking stick and greeting everyone who passed us. A daycare center's-worth of small children went by and half of them turned and tried to follow Eddie.*

*"He rounded a corner and staggered. I caught him before he could fall. Getting him to a bench and then into a cab was easy. There was nothing to him. 'You're not taking care of yourself at all,'" I said.*

*“I was afraid of getting well,” he told me. “My being sick is the only thing I’ve ever done that hasn’t made you loathe me.”*

*“He laughed when I cried. And then we switched roles. It was the last time we met.”*

Last night I told Suze that I was calling his eulogy “The Last McGabber.” And she said, “There will always be another one.”

This morning, she just called to say the car that will take us to Kennedy Airport en route to L.A. will be downstairs in five minutes.

I’ve put a copy of this McGabber in my luggage. I stick another one in my jacket pocket and have one to give to Suze.

All this, the eulogy, the flight, Eddie Mackey’s Memorial Service, is done to dim my awareness that for the first time since I was five, I’m alone without magic in this world.

