

# Part One

In the land of the blind  
the one-eyed man  
only bumps into things  
half of the time.  
-- Jive Guru Dave

## Prologue

There was a fierce wind blowing that morning. It was a wet, gusting Montreal Express that swirled over the streets of Boston, rattling windows and screeching through the cracks in houses like the howl of The Banshee.

On mornings like this people delayed going outdoors; dawdling over a second cup of coffee and feigning deep interest in late breaking radio news. Anything to avoid the wind's chill intrusion which brought up intimations of mortality and a cold, lonely grave.

Colley K. awoke with a frightened groan inside a dumpster on Barnstead Street. He was still wet-brained and stupid drunk from the night before, and it had scared him to awaken from a dead sleep into the moist, stinking darkness.

When he finally realized where he was, he forced his hands to push against the dumpster's steel lid, his back and shoulders straining for leverage against the unstable bed of trash. The heavy lid rose only inches, leaking in wind and dim daylight, but not even close to high enough to flip it over onto its hinges.

Finally Colley thought to kick upwards hard with his feet, and the metal door flew open with a clang. He managed to stagger upright, then hopped down, his feet hitting the sidewalk with a painful jolt that shot up his spindly legs and made his insides wobble.

Steadying himself he surveyed the steel box and shivered fearfully as he thought of the poor mopes who'd awakened too late -slept through the garbage man's warning raps on the metal- awakened in a terrifying descent into the compactor; the crushing maw indifferent to the distinctions between garbage and luckless men.

As he oriented himself, gazing up and down the cobbled street, memories of yesterday's bender staggered through his brain.

He remembered getting all showered and duded up at the illegal Alms Or Oblivion camp. That's where he'd scored a secondhand herringbone sports jacket and 40% cotton grey checkered pants out of the free clothing bin. He'd even buttoned a fairly new blue tattersall dress shirt over his ragged Grateful Dead T-shirt, which still bore the mud stains of Woodstock, having remained ripe and unwashed since that legendary weekend nearly twenty-two years earlier.

Looking about as presentable as a drink maddened, weather-beaten stick of a man could, with his wild beard and desperate eyes, he had rushed across the street to Our Lady's just in time to catch the tail end of a funeral.

Positioning himself near the hearse he overheard the pallbearers talking as they heaved the polished wooden coffin into the back of the vehicle.

As he had figured they would the pallbearers were complaining about how thirsty the lifting and toting had made them, and began arguing the relative merits of food and jigger sizes among the three halls that catered Basilica Hill wakes. Soon all were agreed that the widow had done well in choosing Swietek's. The Polack's hall topped the bill with those wonderful smoked Kielbasa sausages served with sweetened sauerkraut, and full one and a half ounce shot glasses, to boot. Their already florid faces slackened in ecstasy as they thought of the coming feast.

When the funeral procession drove off to lay its wooden egg in Cardinal Cushing Cemetery, Colley K. wandered back into the park and dawdled around the free clothing bins until he found a suitable piece of black cloth from which to fashion a mourner's armband. Then he'd taken a leisurely stroll up Apley Street and settled himself in the alley across from Swietek's to await the funeral party's return. Forty minutes later the mourner's cars started filling up the street.

Colley quietly mingled with the crowd as it entered the hall, then headed straight for the already packed open bar. At first everyone was too busy quenching their eleven-in-the-morning thirsts to notice anything out of place about Colley, and after a couple of Swietek's heavy shots nobody gave a damn.

Colley K. had decided to pace himself, so he'd made sure to hit the buffet table for something to line his stomach. He had to admit that the *golumpki* and *pierogi* and even the coarse black bread were delicious, and he was surprised to discover that his woefully shrunken stomach had room for second helpings. His pot belly now contentedly aslosh with Slavic food he almost waddled back to the bar full of confidence and good cheer.

At any decent wake time is measured not in minutes or hours, but in shots of whiskey, and by half past his seventh shot Colley had become dear friends with a distant cousin of the deceased, who -recognizing another stone alcoholic- invited him along on an old fashioned pub crawl when the wake finally broke up.

They hit every one of Basilica Hill's considerable number of taverns nursing their drunk along as only skilled inebriates can; sipping beer for a while and conversing in the fond glow that drinkers know, then stoking the fire with a glorious jigger of whiskey.

But even the most careful of drunks must reach his fill, and by ten past their twentieth shot they had become so fuddled of brain and spastic in movement that they were kicked out of two bars in a row, and found themselves standing drinkless and dazed on Barnstead Street, when Colley's companion remembered that they were near the home of his old pal Finn Malrooney, whom he hadn't seen in years.

Recognizing Finn's name, Colley K. was taken aback, for even in his drunken state he found it hard to believe that someone like Finn could *have* a friend, let alone his dear pal, Whats-hizname.

During the early Seventies Colley had belonged to a commune called Ashanti located a few blocks farther up The Hill on Tremain Street. Finn was co-founder of the place, and had come up with the idea of planting the communards at freeway exits, where they sold flowers to motorists stopped at red lights.

He remembered Finn as a mean-spirited hypocrite who preached Revolutionary Love, but was always trying to nickel and dime extra cash out of his Flower Children, as they were known. He also remembered Finn's shoes. The bastard always wore expensive Tony Lama boots under his street-fighter bell bottoms. Colley's old man used to tell him, "You see a guy spends more on a pair of shoes than a working stiff shells out for rent -just keep your freaking distance. That's one ice-coldhearted, ball breaking son-of-a-bitch."

He was about to tell Whats-hizname to forget about visiting Finn; that he was feeling really tired and just wanted some sleep, but the silly bastard was already ringing the bell and banging on the door. The porch light went on, and suddenly there was a big fellow standing before them huge and glaring.

Colley took a step back, and blinked because he was seeing double and focusing his eyes was nearly impossible, but the man -even taking into consideration fifteen or so years of high living- sure didn't look like the Finn Malrooney he had despised.

Then the man spoke, or rather growled at them. Colley blinked again because the voice sure as hell sounded like Finn's.

He squinted drunkenly and peered more closely at the fellow, but by now Finn resembled a Picasso painting with two eyes on the cheek and a muddle of garish patches of color.

Old Whats-hizname, however, seemed to have no doubt about the man being his old buddy and, since he matched Finn in large build, surprised the fellow with a sloppy drunken hug.

Finn's cold eyes pierced Colley's across Whats-hizname's shoulder, as if he blamed Colley for this outrage against

his person.

Colley lowered his gaze, and found himself staring at Finn's shoes. He saw that Finn had stopped wearing boots, but still did not wear regular rich bastard shoes like Bruno-Magli, Peal, or Ferragamo. He had on some kind of super screw-you-peasant glove leather jobs with a kind of understated buff -not a regular shine, but a buff for chrissakes.

Colley had no way of knowing it, but Finn Malrooney's shoes were hand made in London by a boot maker commissioned by the Prince of Wales. They were tooled around precise cobblers casts of his feet, and he had six pair shipped over to him every year. Each pair cost five times what most working stiff's laid out for rent.

Finn Malrooney was one wicked ice-coldhearted, ball breaker of a sonofabitch.

Colley had a sudden vision of his father: red-faced drunk, and mean as a wolverine, warning him off. Almost reflexively he abandoned old Whats-hizname on the porch; leaving him still heartily embracing his long lost pal, Finn.

Colley stumbled down the wooden steps, and out of the porch light's glow. He pretty much ran down the dark street in his haste to get away. The rest was a complete blank until he'd awakened in the dumpster.

Colley now shoved his cold hands deep into the torn lining of his coat pockets. He hunched his shoulders against the powerful wind and, head down, started off down the street. He spotted a half pack of cigarettes someone had dropped wedged between two cobblestones on the street and swooped it up quick as a seagull.

Pausing behind a thick maple tree, fresh butt in mouth, he fished around in his pockets for a light. His eyes roamed idly around the neighborhood as he searched, and he was surprised to see Finn Malrooney's house right across the street. He recognized it by the Kelly Green paint job.

He was growing frustrated. His pockets contained several dollars in change that he vaguely remembered snatching last night when Whats-hizname wasn't looking, but still could find no matches.

Then a half-drunken thought crossed his mind. He giggled, thinking of the look Finn would give him if he rang his bell and asked for a light. He knew Finn's reputation for murderous rage, but he was just thrashed enough that his sense of self preservation was on hold. He decided to cross the street and see what would happen.

Still giggling drunkenly he was just about to step around from behind the maple tree when Finn Malrooney's house exploded in an orange-red ball of fire.

The intensity of the blast drove flaming pieces of debris across Barnstead Street in a furious rush of searing hot air. Pieces of wood, some as much as an inch thick, embedded themselves into the street side of the maple tree like so many flaming arrows. For a long moment Colley K. stood frozen surrounded by a firestorm that he dazedly believed had arisen from Hell itself.

Hot soot and smoking ash began to rain down upon him, then he heard something rustling in the new-formed leaves above him as it slowly dislodged itself from the maple's entangling branches. His eyes were tightly closed, but the thing made such a loud plopping noise when it landed in front of him that he reflexively looked down onto the sidewalk. His mouth fell open in shock as his nostrils were filled with a sickening stench, and he realized that he was staring at a charred, blackened human foot clad in a shiny brown loafer.

It sizzled on the cobblestones, blistering and popping; then suddenly burst into flames. The heavy wind made the burning foot shimmy and move towards Colley as he backed away in horror. A mighty gust suddenly heaved the burning foot towards him like a kick, dripping off orange and blue sparks as it flew at him.

Colley screamed and started running furiously down the street, his hangover swallowed up in an overwhelming rush of fear driven adrenalin. He saw people hesitantly emerging from their houses, and in the distance he heard sirens. But he kept on running unable to shake the feeling that the burning foot was right behind him.

Several blocks later he slowed to a halt, and breathlessly leaned against a lamppost near a corner package store. He felt a muddy wetness on his ass and he grimaced, recognizing the unmistakable fetid odor that arose from his pants. Colley K.'s mind told him to head over to the Alms Or Oblivion encampment for a cleansing shower and a new pair of pants. That, he knew, was the logical thing to do, but his thirst was too urgent for him to heed the prissy decrees of logic. What he deeply needed really badly was a drink.

He felt his coat pocket to reassure himself that the lump of stolen change was still in place, then -his mind as feverishly concentrated as a theologian's upon **The Book of Revelation**- he walked into the packie intent upon falling into his own personal End Times.

# Chapter One

Killing is a fairly common practice around Basilica Hill, given the fevered nature of its inhabitants. But murder, cold-blooded murder -especially the murder of one of their own- now *that* can capture local attention.

Finn Malrooney had been born and raised on that small spot of earth people call The Hill, and his life had been the subject of many a spectacular tale of piratical behavior and daring-do.

Finn, in life, was a man to be guardedly despised and cautiously grumbled about; no truth to be uttered openly, for fear of reprisal. Now, with his death, there came an exhilarating release. For now his story could be passed around like a pudding spoon until it had been scrubbed smooth by many flapping tongues.

Basilica Hill is a quirky, insular Boston neighborhood of three decker wood frame houses perched along spiraling streets that ascend above Our Lady's. The church was built with what is known as Basilica pudding stone, cut away from the now steeply sheer east end of The Hill itself. The stone's purple-grey color is unique to that small section of Boston, and local legend has hewn the bedrock of its origins to fit the somewhat pixelated, always unconventional tendencies of the neighborhood's eccentric inhabitants.

On cool Spring evenings wives grown old much too soon spin the tale to little ones dragging underfoot in the kitchen. And the story grows from house to house and expands in the minds of the children; explaining much about the small world in which they live.

Molly Malrooney recited the folklore to all of her children while they were still scabby-kneed and shaky on their legs. She spoke quietly, and without inflection as she moved deftly among her skillets and knives, and worked what seemed to the young ones to be her magic over the blue gas fire.

Her tone never varied, nor did she use simple words so the children would have an easier time understanding the tale's telling. She didn't seem to much care about that. She simply repeated it word for word as many times as she was asked. It gave nightmares to some, and for them a recitation or two was enough. To others -young Finn, especially- it provided a good laugh, and they never seemed to tire of the hearing of it.

Still, the tale remained the same, based as it was on the bloody origins of Basilica Hill itself.

"They say that in ancient times a Clan of mighty giants once roamed these parts," Ma would say, stirring a bubbling pot. "They were a fierce and proud people; given to terrible fits of temper and spontaneous acts of generosity. The giants had a great leader, Rune, who was wise in the ways of keeping peace among his impetuous people. But, after the passing of a thousand soft Summers and a thousand and one ice-hard Winters, Rune grew sickly and feeble, and one cool Spring evening -much like this one- he simply curled up and died.

"All of the giants gathered for his funeral and wake, and as a repast for the mourners a great pot of pudding was set to boil; for giants love nothing so much as their plum pudding, with the skin all shiny and burbling at the top.

"Since Rune was so well loved the wake lasted for forty days and nights, and the pudding -to which the women giants had continued adding sugar and spices- began to ferment in its great stone pot, until one day it had turned into an alcoholic grog.

"The giants had never drunk liquor before, and the alcohol went straight and powerfully to their heads; overriding what little sense they had. So the grog flowed much too freely as sips grew to guzzles, and guzzles led to drunken arguments which inevitably led to the exchange of blows. But Rune was no longer there to douse the flames of angry passion, and so passions flared red-hot into a ferocious, uncontrollable brawl.

"It was every man and woman for themselves -and the children too- all beating each other tremendous whacks over heads and bodies with their great pudding spoons. Spoons so big that you could bathe a cow in one, with room left over for two large pigs and a poodle.

"For seven ferocious days and seven horrible nights they fought fiercely and bloodily until the whole Clan of giants had been killed, except for one lone survivor who was himself mortally wounded.

"The bleeding giant cried out in shame and remorse at the horrible sight of the twisted, broken bodies that lay piled up all around him. Tearfully he staggered to the fire-pit, and with his last dying strength he tipped over the Clan's immense pudding pot; spilling out its deadly brew to cover the grisly carnage.

"Many thousands of years passed, and the earth froze, and thawed, and then froze and thawed again until the pudding had hardened over the bones of the dead giants to form our own Basilica Hill. And that's the end of it."

Some say that the story does not end there, and that the giants are not truly dead, but are merely asleep, and their terrible dreams have seeped through the stone and clouded the minds of the people of The Hill; making them erratically suspicious and quick to take offense.

Paranoia so pervades the area that family enclaves of three and four houses have been cut into the hillside, with thick wrought iron gates enclosing private compounds safe and away from the prying eyes of nosy neighbors.

Most Hill residents heard about Finn Malrooney's explosive demise over lunch.

Even though one could argue that bloody murder –despite local disclaimers- was buried deeply, was in fact the essence of The Hill, Finn Malrooney's slaughter became a favorite topic of astonished discussion along the twisty slopes for days on end; for he was well known by many and hated by most.

There were a goodly number of self-satisfied smirks displayed at having known all along that it would come to this. Most agreed that someone of his abnormal, even enthusiastic, wickedness was long overdue for planting so that the Good Lord could re-cycle the materials, and maybe get it right the next time. Others rejoiced in The Hill's many local saloons as if the clock were turned back several months, and it was New Years Eve 1991 all over again.

Many lovely flower arrangements were sent to the closed casket funeral Mass; for Hill people knew that it would not be wise to insult the Malrooney Clan, and especially Da -The Malrooney himself- who was a real firm stickler about the proprieties.

Paz-Ortiz, the florist, told Moriarty, the undertaker, that he'd never seen such an outpouring of visible joy and relief. Moriarty topped him by confiding that several prominent Hill people, not known to be exactly friends of Finn's, had pulled him aside and offered him very good money for a few private moments alone with the body.

Moriarty told Paz-Ortiz that he was sorely tempted, because he had no great liking for Malrooney himself, ever since Finn had cheated him on the payments for his late wife, Susan's, funeral. But he'd had to refuse the requests: not because of their blatant illegality -not even because of the sacrilege- but for practical reasons.

There was barely enough meat left on Finn's corpse to make a decent roast, let alone desecrate. Moriarty didn't want to be accused of taking money under false pretenses.

