

## From Chapter 9: Laffey's Tavern

*Author's note: In the "Shack No More" chapter, Jerry talks with his friend Albert and attempts to find out who burned down Trio Diablo's shack. The following cut was another memory of neighborhood places and friends. For all I know, Laffey's Tavern, which was the actual name of the bar, might still be sitting on Fairfield Avenue.*

...“Jimmy Gemm?” whispered Albert. “Why do you think it was him?”

“Cause Kerry and I were playing maul ball in the cemetery and on our way home we saw smoke on the hillside. So we walked up Tennessee Avenue to see what was going on and all the fire trucks were there, and there was a crowd of people, and Jimmy Gemm was lurking at the back of the crowd.”

Albert leaned in closer. “Lurking?” he whispered.

“Yes, lurking,” I said. “Like hanging around, skulking, creeping.”

“Well, he is creep,” said Albert. “I guess he could have done it.”

“Of course he could have done it. He’s a psycho.”

Albert sat quietly and began to chew his lip again. “I can ask around. Maybe Andy knows.”

“Why would Andy know?”

“Cause his mom kinda knows Jimmy’s dad and Jimmy’s dad brings him to the bar and sometimes Andy talks to Jimmy.”

Andy Toth, and his brother Tony, lived with their mom in a tiny three-room apartment above a garage on an alley way off Fairfield Avenue. The brothers were small for their age, and their mom was small, too, which might have been a good thing because not only was their apartment tiny, but it was

crammed with stuff, like old toys and newspapers and clothing and pots and pans, plus there must have been four or five cats living with them.

The garage that Andy and Tony live in sits behind Laffey's Tavern. I used to think that the only place you'd find the word *tavern* would be in a book about Middle Earth or the American Revolution. It turns out, however, there are plenty of taverns in Johnstown. There's The Phoenix Tavern, Morris Tavern, Murphy's Tavern, Dively's Tavern, and Rocky's Tavern. And that's just for starters. My dad says tavern is just a fancy way of saying bar, as in a place to buy booze, and in the West End there are plenty of places to buy booze. There are even more places in Cambria City, where there's a church and a bar on every corner. Or at least that's what my dad says.

Anyway, Andy and Tony's mom was a waitress at Laffey's. Sometimes, when I was playing with them, they'd go into the bar and ask their mom for a glass of pop and a bag of pretzels. I'd follow them in and Mrs. Toth would have us sit at a table against the wall as we drank our Cokes and ate our pretzels. Inside, it was cool and dark and musty. The place smelled like stale beer, old wood, cigarette smoke and French fry grease. There was a TV above the bar, which was the long wooden counter on which the bar tender would set bottles of beer and little glasses of whiskey, and there were always at least two or three guys sitting there, watching whatever was on the TV, their shoulders hunched, their elbows resting on the long counter, a sweating beer bottle in their hands. Even on weekday afternoons, and even on bright, beautiful, sunny days, there were guys in Laffey's, sitting in the dark at the bar on old wooden stools, watching TV while they smoked cigarettes and drank beer. I could

never figure that out. Why would you want to sit in a stinky dark bar on a glorious summer day?

“Well?” asked Albert.

“Well, what?” I said, still thinking about Laffey’s.

“You want me to ask around? About who set the fire?”

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. “Yeah,” I said. “Ask around. If anybody knows for sure, then let me know, okay?”...