

Balling the Jack

Frank Baldwin



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Balling the Jack / F. Baldwin — «HarperCollins»,

Sharp, funny, romantic tale of love and gambling in slacker-generation New York. Tom Reasons is a young man who takes his pay cheque every week and bets it all on a Friday night ball game. Then it's either champagne or pot-noodles for a week. He's lost his girl because he couldn't commit to her and now he regrets it. He hangs out at an Irish bar and plays on the darts team with his pals. One drunken night, he challenges the captain of the meanest, dirtiest team in the league to a money-match. And then doubles the bet. Now the race is on for Tom to come up with the \$40,000 stake and get his team to win without telling them how much pressure they are really under! Great suspense, lots of laughs, true romance.

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A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in the USA by Simon & Schuster 1997

Published in paperback by HarperCollins*Publishers* in 1997

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Source ISBN: 9780006499770

Ebook Edition © MAY 2016 ISBN: 9780008191474

Version: 2016-05-09

DEDICATION

FOR LORA

EPIGRAPH

I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about.

—Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

Balling the Jack (slang)—To risk everything on one attempt or effort.

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CHAPTER ONE

LET ME tell you about the bets.

I work as a paralegal in a Wall Street firm. Every Friday morning they pay me \$447 and every Friday night I bet four hundred of it on a ball game. If I lose, I go the next week on the rims. But if I win—and I win a lot—I take on the town.

Here's the system: All week I mull over the matchups, and by Friday one or two start feeling like winners. Friday after work I buy a Foster's Oil Can at the deli across the street and start the long walk up the East Side to Adam's Curse, my home bar, where my bookie Toadie waits on his stool. I go over the games, weigh the angles. Nothing too scientific in my method. I'm partial to hot pitchers, even on the road, and I steer clear of the big favorites. Pick them and you have to give away two or three runs to Toadie, runs that always seem to come back in the late innings and bite you in the ass.

Just last month I had the Braves giving three against San Diego. They coasted into the ninth up 8–2. I had the money counted already and was spending it in my head on the blonde at the jukebox. Had the restaurant picked out, the wine, was holding the cab door for her, telling the driver my address, thinking I'd give my roommates a little treat, maybe even put them in the mood.

Then, bam! The rookie that Cox trotted out to pitch the ninth walked the bases loaded, Joyner unloaded them with a shot into the upper deck, and just like that the bet, the date, a week of fun down the toilet, and Toadie clapping me on the back, saying, "Tough one, kid." That's one of two phrases he knows. When I win he says, "You were born lucky, kid."

Tonight I'm going with the Phillies on the road over the Cards. Schilling starts for the Phils and he's on a big-time roll. It's an even game, too, so I don't have to spot Toadie any runs. Just the usual four bills once I'm in the door. Most bookies don't need the cash up front, but Toadie works the low end of the betting public, and he won't issue a stub without the dough in his pocket. He's not much to look at, Toadie. The same combat pants every day, a sweatshirt over his gut, and a brown rug on his bowling-ball head. Coke-bottle glasses that make his eyes bug and lips stretching out of his face like—you guessed it—a toad. A money belt around his waist for the stash.

I don't think I've ever been in Adam's Curse when he wasn't drinking bourbon and taking bets. He's worked some deal with the owner, Stella, who's in tight with the cops. He can afford to slip her ten percent or so, I'm sure, because Toadie takes down the regulars pretty good. In a year of betting, though, he hasn't made anything off me.

Tonight he's in his usual spot and grunts in greeting as I walk in.

"I'll take the Phils," I tell him, counting out four hundreds into his palm.

I take a seat at the long oak bar and let out a breath. The sweet release I get handing over the money is the best part of the week. Five days to earn the bread, to agonize over the pick, and ten seconds to put it all on the line. Now my work is over and I'm like a priest who quits praying and leaves the rest to the man upstairs. It's out of my hands.

Betting all you have cleans the system. Spend enough time in the office I work in and you start to think the point of life is to stay on an even keel all the time. Just today, our receptionist Kay passed around a sign-up sheet for a stress-reduction program the partners are touting. That's a big theme around that place—avoiding stress.

Me, I think they have it all wrong. I think we *need* to jack up the old ticker sometimes, like a car needs to get onto the highway and go full out once in a while. It's good for us.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for computers and cash machines. But let's face it: a lot of modern life isn't exactly out there on the edge. How many times do you feel your heart in your chest these days? Your first night with a girl, maybe, sprinting from a mugger, I guess, or if the Knicks make it to the finals. But that's about it. Work? I've been there a year now and I don't think my pulse has

topped forty yet. That's why I bet. I mean, it's for the bucks too, sure, but not only. Betting it all reminds me I'm alive.

I guess I should have been around twenty thousand years ago. Back then, nobody had to go out chasing thrills. They had all the excitement they could handle just staying alive. Look at the caveman. He could pretty much count on jacking up his heart rate a few times a day. If he wanted to eat he had to kill some beast with two-foot fangs. That'll get your blood moving. Then there were invasions to repel, the harsh elements to battle, and one wild animal or another set to pick him off if he dropped his guard. Sex, too. It must have been tough enough charming some Jane back to the cave with grunts and hand signals, but if he did win her over, there was always some brute with a club on him ready to knock our boy out of the picture.

Now we've gone all the way the other way. We move paper around the desk all day, order in from a deli, and rent a movie with our squeeze at night. If we have a squeeze. But that's another story.

I just shake my head at these tea hounds who live on the safe side all the time. I can't imagine never gambling on anything. Never risking the last dollar; the hangover, the slap in the face. Risk and reward, baby. Risk and reward.

These few minutes before game time all the crap in my life drains away. Stella asks who we're rooting for this week, pours me an Absolut on the rocks, and I feel myself go empty. At peace for the first time all week. My calm holds through the starting lineups and the national anthem.

With the first pitch comes the rush and I'm off. Living in the purity of the big bet. Feeling the surge one minute, the clutch of panic the next. I take in everything: the ump's low strike zone, sure to hurt their starter; the wind blowing out to left, ready to give my sluggers a boost; the first sign of fatigue in my pitcher. I feel every pitch in the gut and come up out of my chair for a rally. I talk to the managers.

"Don't sacrifice. Not here. Show some balls—play for the big inning. No—don't walk him—they'll pinch-hit. That's it, send the runner. That's it!"

I rock back and forth, swear at the screen. I'm happy. At stake is the good life. Lose and I'm a drone again, kissing ass at the firm, stuck in the pad all week eating instant noodles, just enough money to live on till next Friday. A schmuck like everyone else. But win and I'm the man. Eight hundred bucks in my pocket and six nights to spend it. The first winning Friday of each month covers the rent. The rest of them I eat well, drink well, spoil my date, if I can get one. What more could a guy want?

Tonight the Phillies do me solid. Down 1–0 early, Dykstra, ex-Met and a bit of a gambler himself, doubles in two in the fifth and seals it with a poke in the ninth. Schilling does the rest. Goes all the way on a six-hitter, striking out the side to end it.

"You were born lucky, kid," says Toadie, handing over the money with a scowl. I count it out onto the bar. I give Stella a high five and settle my tab, throwing in a bourbon for Toadie and a round for the albies at the end of the bar.

Man, I wish all you chrusters who rail against gambling could feel the rush of victory just once. You'd come around. As I leave, Stella calls after me.

"You ready for Tuesday night, Tom?"

"You bet."

CHAPTER TWO

MY ROOMMATE is the nicest guy in the world.

Fill his hat with piss and he'll apologize for not owning a bigger one. If the meek ever inherit this place, he'll be at the head table, wanting a spritzer to wash down his paté—if it's not too much trouble, of course. As I walk in tonight he and his girl are on the couch, watching the second of two rented Italian films. They started them early, I'm sure, to leave plenty of time for discussion.

If you guessed I don't like him too much, you're right. Mike seemed okay when I answered the ad, but that was a year ago and I wasn't too picky. I was just out of school, staying with my aunt and her brood in Queens. One more night at that dinner table and I would have done myself in. Mike wasn't queer, I could move in right away, and you can't beat the East Village. Three stops on the subway to Wall Street and stumbling distance to my favorite bars.

Back then Mike was a regular guy. He'd take in a ball game, get drunk now and then, even chase a little tail, in his own fashion. For him that meant answering the lonely-girl ads in the personals. Three months ago his pen pal Molly moved in and Mike's been sliding down the manhood tree ever since.

He's about hit the bottom branch. Won't touch a drop, can't waste his time on sports anymore, and forget about dragging him out to see a band. Hell, he won't put a piece of food in his mouth without clearing it with her first. Hey, if he wants to cut his balls off, that's his business, but he's started in on the lectures and between the two of them there's no relief. On drinking: "Well, of course I stopped. Molly's in AA. I'm showing my solidarity." On football: "How can you call it a sport when grown men deliberately try to hurt each other?" On late-night skin shows: "It's not just the women you degrade, Tom. It's yourself as well."

It'd be one thing if they gave me a little show once in a while, since I'm not getting much myself these days. Our rooms are wall-to-wall and there isn't a concert hall in the city with better sound. Lord knows I've treated them to a few duets. Either they don't fuck at all, though, or they've figured out how to do it without a sound. Knowing Molly, she finds the whole business too messy.

What kills me about her is she could be a real babe if she gave a hoot. Her face is out of a soap commercial, country-fresh, and she's built okay, too. A little wide in the seat, maybe, but nothing a few laps in the park wouldn't cure.

She's not interested in a few laps in the park, though, or a few rounds in the sack, for that matter. Molly is one of those girls ... well, you know the type. Baggy sweaters, big skirts all the time, combs her hair straight down. Keeps away from a razor, if you know what I mean. Just makes no effort at all. One of these days I'll have to surprise her in the shower to make sure she's got the goods down there.

She's no charmer in the personality department either. Just after she moved in I made the mistake of telling her that with a makeover and some new clothes she could be a real hot number. She's been one long sermon ever since.

Molly by herself I could handle, but she got the ring in Mike's nose early and the way she leads him around now is sad to see. First it was music appreciation, then pottery workshop. Now it's cooking class, and after the last one he's making noises about going veggie. Next thing you know I'll have a juicer on my hands.

I tried to clue Mike into my feelings, in my subtle way. Last week was his birthday and I bought him a dress. I think that got to him. He's been real quiet ever since.

Tonight, though, they're not my problem. If I'd lost the bet and were stuck in for the weekend we'd probably have it out. But I'm flush, and even the two of them can't kill my mood.

"Hi, guys. How are the flicks?"

"Nonpareil," says Molly. "Both of them beyond reproach."

One of these days she'll learn to speak plain English.

“From your demeanor I assume you won your bet. This would mean you’re not in for the evening.”

“I did, and I’m not. Meeting Dave at Finn’s to check out the new band. How about it? Can I interest you two in some rock ‘n’ roll?”

“Hardly. We’ve got quite the day ahead tomorrow. Though I shouldn’t speak for Mike.”

“What do you say, guy? I’ll have you back by dawn.”

“No thanks.”

He doesn’t look at me. Must still be sore about the dress. Oh well. If I thought they’d come along I wouldn’t have offered. I shower, change into my shorts and Mets T-shirt, and head out the door.

FRIDAY NIGHTS in this city are for the young. They shouldn’t let anyone over thirty out of their apartment. Walking up Second Avenue, an Oil Can in my hand and eight hundred bucks in my pocket, the evening spreads before me like a feast. On the menu tonight is everything you get out of bed for: friends, women, music, drink. From a block away I can see the sign for Finn’s: a neon leprechaun sitting on a shamrock, drinking from a frosty mug. I kill my beer and arc it into a trash basket on the corner. Look out tonight, Manhattan. You’ve met your match.

Liam Kennedy, the manager of Finn O’Shea’s, takes off his shades as I enter and looks hard at me.

“Well, Tom? Are ya carryin’?”

“Thanks to the Phillies.”

He breaks into a grin and grabs my hand. “That’s it, lad! Man after me heart. I’ll tell the waitresses—they’ll keep the pints coming.”

“Thanks.”

These are good days for Liam Kennedy. A year ago, Finn O’Shea’s was just a solid Irish bar like a hundred others in town. A few dartboards, a jukebox, a couple of brogues from the old country pouring drinks. One of five in the O’Shea chain, kept in business by the soaks and the rough Irish illegals, who roll in after work or before work or because they can’t find work. When the recession hit, all the bars felt the pinch, and Papa O’Shea laid down the word: The one with the lowest receipts in six months was out of business. Leave it to an Irish boss to pit his own against each other.

Kennedy knew he was in trouble. Two of the O’Shea bars are on the Upper East Side, milking the yuppies. One is in the Village, milking everybody, and the other is in Hell’s Kitchen, pulling in the Garden crowd and the Jersey high school kids through the tunnel. Finn’s, though, is stuck here at Twenty-first and Second. It’s not uptown, it’s not downtown, and it’s not midtown. Liam was getting his ass kicked.

He tried going to the other managers to see if they could put up a united front. Pool their receipts, maybe. All for one and one for all. They told him to get lost. Said we don’t make the rules, Kennedy.

Up against it, he hit on the idea of pulling one of the dartboards on the weekends and sticking in a band. He booked some real morgue acts at first, old geezers strumming guitars, singing “Danny Boy” and “Kathleen,” barely keeping themselves awake. Even the alkie couldn’t listen to them. Liam needed a new sound, and as luck would have it, it walked right in his door.

One day, four scruffy guys showed up at the bar clutching a demo. They called themselves the Coffin Ships, after the boats that brought so many Irish to the New World. Looking at the tiny stage, the bums slumped over their drinks, they must have started to wonder why they came. As for Kennedy, he wasn’t sure he liked the looks of them.

Neither party had a lot to lose, though. The Coffin Ships had been chased out of all the local bars in the Bronx for *not* singing “Danny Boy” and “Kathleen.” For them it was a chance to play inside, in Manhattan; hell, they might even let women in the bar. It beat the pants off a street corner on Fordham Road. As for Liam, what the hell. They had to be better than the last act, and they were

cheap. He promised them all they could drink and twenty percent of beer sales above the average take. They promised to make a lot of noise.

By chance I caught them on their first night. Stopped in to confirm a dart match, saw them tuning up, and figured I'd give them a few songs. I didn't leave until they locked the door on me. There were only thirty of us, half of them friends of the band, but once they took the stage they didn't care.

The singer sang and played electric guitar. They had a guy on the uilleann pipes, a smooth sax, bongos, and a drum machine. They did great covers, and their own stuff was even better. Killer songs about drinking in the new country and missing the old. About fallen heroes, about workers uniting, about chasing tail. Songs funny and sad that kept you moving. I was swept along, into the second set, downing one pint after another. Jigging to the jigs, reeling to the reels, having a blast.

Late in the night they played the first strains of a song that sounded familiar but no, it couldn't be, not here, not by a bunch of drunken micks. But it was! Bob Marley, "Get Up, Stand Up," and damned if they didn't hit it just right. At 3 A.M. they sent us out the door to "Anarchy in the UK" and we spilled into the street exhausted, excited, drunk, promising ourselves we'd be back.

Nothing beats finding a new band. One day they don't exist and the next they explode into your head and are part of you. I bought the T-shirts and homemade tapes, learned all the words to their songs. Told my friends about them, passed out fliers, called the college radio stations. "What do you mean, you never heard of them? Don't you guys do your homework?"

Each week built to Saturday night. We would stake out a spot by the bar and send drinks to the stage between songs. We plotted to get them into *Rolling Stone*. Word spread. Thirty people turned to fifty, to a hundred, to a line down the block, another set on Wednesdays, a doorman, a cover, and some real faces in the crowd. Record men, dealmakers. This band was the real thing, and we were a part of it.

Rock 'n' roll is a language and those who speak it a tribe. A good band, when you take them to heart, gives you more than songs. They give you nights, mad nights outside yourself when you feel your youth so strong it breaks through your skin. We would all be packed together, swaying, roaring the chorus to "Free Us Now," our insides hollowed out, our fever rising with the music. At the peak we could barely stand it. We were no longer citizens. Our jobs, careers, parents belonged on another planet. We wanted only this world, right here, and so long as this song didn't end we had it. Then the last chord crashed and we stood dazed, famished, like lovers stopped before the finish.

We looked at each other, really looked, on the verge of something, all of us. Some shared truth inside us the next song promised to reveal, if we could just hang on. And in the instant before it started a line from a college teacher I hated would come back to me. "You kids think the answer's in a rock song, or between a woman's legs." Well, some nights it is, Teach, and as they broke into "Irish Freedom" I started rubbing up the girl next to me, and when she rubbed back I pulled her through the crowd, out the door, into a cab and gave it to her right there in the back seat, my face in her shirt as we took off, covered in sweat, the words of the last song still ringing in my head.

No wonder they stand up in Congress and plot the death of rock 'n' roll. This stuff *is* dangerous.

The Coffin Ships hit the big time, as you might have guessed. Signed on the dotted line for one of the giants, and a month later here came the MTV truck, right into Finn's to film the video! You'll see our gang in the back if we survive the edit. These days the band keeps pretty fast company. The singer drinks with movie stars of Irish blood who pop in after a shoot, and you can often see the sax player on Page Six in the *Post*. Even the drummer, who hasn't been sober since the first gig and was a little short of hat size to start with, never leaves without a girl on his arm.

Finn's is a star now too. When the band's first album took off, so did the bar's rep as a launching pad. Writers started coming around. First the underground press, then *The Voice*, and finally, yes, *Rolling Stone*. Liam sits them all at the bar, pours pints and tells again how the new home of Irish music in New York began as just a dream in his head. He's always careful to imply he's a bit of a musician himself, though as a businessman there's not the time for it.

When the Coffin Ships's album hit the Top 10, the majors declared roots Irish music the next rage, and suddenly anybody with a cousin in Ireland and an amp had a shot at a contract. They all wanted to play Finn's because that's where the scouts were. Told Liam they'd play for nothing for a shot at the big time, so that's what Liam pays them. Books the best for Friday night, the others for Monday and Thursday, throws in an open mike on Sunday and now he fills the place every night, at ten bucks a head. Takes in three times the other O'Shea bars combined. Liam still stops in on them from time to time. "Just for a pint, y'know, and to see how they're getting on. We Irish stick together."

A few weeks ago I saw the Coffin Ships for the last time. Headed over Saturday night, as usual, drinking an Oil Can, getting psyched, but when I saw the line down the block I slowed, and at the door I couldn't bring myself to go in. I watched through the window awhile. Saw them set up, dive into the first set, the crowd going nuts. I thought back to the first night, just a few of us there, the magic feeling you get at the start of things. Was it really a year ago? I remembered the first time I heard them on the radio, turning from the deli register with a beer and stopping dead as the singer's voice came through the speakers, singing "New County Down." I thought of all that and then I tipped my beer to them, through the glass, and walked home.

When you're with a band from the start and they make it big, there comes a time they don't need you anymore. They belong to everyone now and not to you. Letting go is like ending an affair. The last few Saturdays were rough.

Dave says the buzz on tonight's band is good, though. Some outfit called Aisling Chara—you tell me how to pronounce it. The singer is supposed to have a real set of pipes, they got some little guy plays hell out of the electric cello, whatever that is, and according to Liam, if Neil Young ever hears their cover of "Cinnamon Girl," he'll go back into the studio and get it right this time. Maybe I'm back in business.

Dave waves from a choice spot between two groups of girls. When I reach him he's trying to explain the concept of a body shot to a pretty German. He claps me on the neck.

"How 'bout those Phillies!" he says. "I talked to Stella. Guess you're buying tonight, huh?"

"All weekend. Pint?"

"Sure, and one for Angila if you can. And shots of Jägermeister. Maybe my German will come back to me."

Looking at Dave you'd never guess I spent half my nights freshman year sleeping in the lounge. A shade under six feet, a bit on the heavy side, dark hair, dark eyes, a small mouth. Not GQ material by a long shot, but Dave gets laid more than anyone I know. It isn't even close.

He's off to a slow start tonight. As the drinks come, I turn just in time to see Angila land a good slap on his kisser and storm away.

I laugh. "You always said you could take a punch, Dave. What happened?"

"I don't know." He works his jaw in his hands. "I thought I told her she has nice eyes, but my German's a little rusty. We should have gone to a better school."

"I'll drink to that. Next ten bucks I give goes to the language department. Cheers." We do our shots. "Say, who's the new waitress?"

"Something else, huh?"

She really is. Slender, with a strange, graceful walk, as if she were on her tiptoes. Blond hair all down her back and a shy smile when I overtip. I wave her back for another round.

"Hi, we'll take two more. I'm Tom Reasons, by the way. This is my friend Dave."

"I know. Liam told us about you. Says I should bring them as you finish. Says you're loaded."

"Well, I am tonight anyway. What time are you off?"

"About three."

"Ever go for a bite after work?"

"Not with a customer." She smiles, only not so shy this time, and glides into the crowd.

“Jesus, Dave. How 'bout that accent? She could tell me to go fuck myself and it would sound like a come-on.”

“I think she just did. Anyway, you don't want to be messing with her. She's Kennedy's cousin. Trust me, the ring would have to go on before the shirt came off. She's Catholic.”

I'm convinced if I picked a girl off the street Dave could tell me her name and the chances of landing her.

“What's wrong with Catholic? We're Catholic.”

“Nothing, if you want to get hitched. But if you don't ...” Dave shudders. “Tom, I swore off Catholic girls this morning, and this time I mean it.”

I laugh.

“I'm serious, Tom. From now on it's the first question I ask.” Dave shakes his head, looks pensive. “You know, it's always the same story. You knock yourself out for them, take them to a great place, and they're a lot of fun. They love to drink, to dance, and the way they dance you can't wait to get 'em in the sack. Everything's perfect until you shoot the dead bolt, and then it all falls apart. The kissing's fine, but you reach for the shirt and the wrestling match starts.” Dave takes a swig of his pint. “Even when they want it they manage to ruin it, Tom. They can never admit they're actually going through with it, so foreplay is out. Right up until you get it in they're telling themselves they're just fooling around, that nothing's really happening. Once it's in, they warm to it, of course, and you get your ten good minutes, but then the party's over. Next morning the beer's worn off and you can tell straight away there won't be any encore. She's clammed up, grabbing her clothes, won't hardly look at you. You leave feeling like you shot the Pope.”

Dave's made this speech before, and every time he winds up back here at Finn's with ten pints in him, standing in a sea of Irish girls. Something has to give, and it's usually Dave.

The band's done tuning up and we turn our attention to the stage. I love the moment just before a band plays the first note. Anything is possible. I'm on my toes, leaning forward.

“One last thing, Tom. Are we going to kick some Irish ass Tuesday night, or what?”

“Damn straight.”

The singer steps to the mike. “A one-two-three-four.”

The songs begin.

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