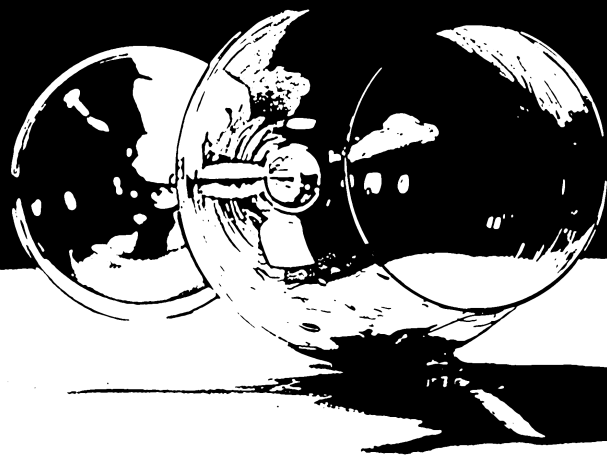


# DEAD IN THE DREGS



**PETER LEWIS**

A BABE STERN MYSTERY

COUNTERPOINT  
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Most of this narrative takes place in the California wine country and on the Côte d'Or in France. Liberties have been taken in portraying these landscapes and their wineries, restaurants, and institutions. The world represented, while bearing some similarity to reality, is fictitious, as are its characters and events. Any resemblance to actual incidents or to actual persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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*To B.,*

*who took me there*

*For J.,*

*who brought me back*





It was held, that every wine disease had its specific microbe. In reality, there is no such thing. Wine bacteria are the result of adaptation by a large number of species to this environment, which is in the first instance unfavorable to them. A few cells of each species have been able, with time, either by mutation or by adaptation, to attack the wine's substrata . . . and have changed into spoilage bacteria.

—Emile Peynaud, *Knowing and Making Wine*



*in the beginning nothing raw matter cold dark a void there are two  
latent on the surface of the sphere of all nature they split and then split again  
from two four, from four eight, from eight, hundreds they eat and eat and multiply  
and multiply again warmth there are thousands they stuff themselves, eating  
and shitting, their offspring the spontaneous combustion, spawning nebulae  
of voracious appetite there are millions identical in their instantaneous gestation  
roiling the waters of the void devouring sugar, more sugar whipping the dark chaos  
into a froth of birth and death heat the stink of their exhalation, foul odors  
of exhumation fill the atmosphere oxygen, no oxygen the frenzy of feeding  
and coupling, gorging themselves primitive violence of creation bacchanalian orgy  
of bubbling, frothing, stinking life and death the boiling waters of life quintessence  
of spirit and their bodies rise and sink, exhausted no air no air there is only spirit  
and death and wine*



# 1

**T**hey brought in the harvest early that year in Napa, and with it, Richard Wilson's body. A perfect flowering, a mild spring dotted with just the right amount of rain, and a hot, dry summer had ripened the fruit to twenty-eight Brix by late August. Wilson's selection, on the other hand, had nothing to do with how sweet he was.

The bar was always dead that time of year. The whole world, it seemed, was out picking. I dreaded going to work but dragged my ass down the mountain and opened the place. I did the books from the night before and swept up. A few customers wandered in, guys too old to stoop in a vineyard for ten hours straight in ninety-degree heat. By three o'clock, I'd done a staggering twenty bucks.

I'll never forget that day. It was the first time I'd seen Wilson in more than a decade, and it was the last day I would see him alive.

I was just settling into the lazy rhythm that creeps up on you late in the afternoon: time to slice lemons and limes, fill the condiment caddy, and contemplate your favorites on the jukebox. Al Green was serenading the few off-hour drinkers who'd straggled into Pancho's, asking his plaintive question "How can you mend a broken heart?" Apparently, none of my customers had a clue.

It was sweltering, so I'd propped the front door open to capture what little breeze there was. I had my back turned and was just emptying the last of a jar of McSweet onions into the caddy, when

a voice out of my past said, "Pour me something I've never tasted." I turned around. He'd put on weight, a lot of weight—the college jock gone to seed—but he was immediately recognizable.

"Hello, Richard." I ducked under the backbar and pulled out a bottle, set a wineglass in front of him, and started to pour. "An old-vine Mataro that'll knock your socks off," I said, as if I had seen him only the day before. He held his hand up.

"Just a taste. I'm on my way to Norton."

"In the middle of harvest?"

"Filling a few gaps before the second edition of my California book goes to press."

He picked up the glass the way pros do, his thumb and forefinger pinching the base of the stem, twirled it deftly, inhaled, and set it down. Then he turned his back to me, took two steps, and stopped.

"I don't get it," he said.

"Get what?"

"This place, your life. You gave it all up . . . for this?"

"Yeah, Top of the Mark," I said. I had no intention of falling for it. "Where are you staying?"

"With a friend."

"Have you seen your father yet?" I said.

"I don't know why Janie moved him out here," Wilson said, shaking his head as he turned around.

"Do you really think it's possible to take care of someone with Alzheimer's long-distance? She'd have had to dump him in a nursing home."

"He's in a nursing home here. His whole life is in New York."

"What life?" I said. "The one he can't remember?"

He stared into the wine. "I feel badly that Janie's been strapped with this."

"Somebody's got to do it. You're not about to put your life on hold. At least this way he's close. She can keep an eye on him, make sure he gets proper medical attention."

It was an accusation, an indictment, and made for an uncomfortable silence.

"What about Janie?" I asked. "Any time for her this trip?"

"I was supposed to have dinner with her last night," Wilson said.

“Supposed?”

“Something came up. I couldn’t make it, but I’ll try to catch her tomorrow before I take off.”

“What about tonight? You could see Danny. I know he’d love to see his uncle.”

He sidestepped the suggestion. “You remember how crazy we were, way back when?” he said, lifting his gaze but refusing to look at himself in the mirror that lined the back of the bar.

“Yeah, pretty intense,” I said, sniffing a glass that reeked of detergent and buffing out a water stain.

“As if our lives depended on what we could detect in a glass of wine,” Wilson mused.

He took a turn into the room, walked to the pool table, and rolled the cue ball across the manicured lawn of felt.

“I’m headed for Europe in a few weeks. You should bag all of this and come with me,” he said. “It would be like old times.”

One of the regulars looked at me as if I were about to walk out the door. And it was tempting, tempting to walk away, to disappear, to leave the bar to my partner, Frank Mulligan, leave my son to Janie, to pretend I was twenty years younger, without a care in the world.

“I’m not going to do that to Danny,” I said. “Owning this place is bad enough. I seem to have less time now than I did in Seattle.”

“You *own* this dump?” When I didn’t answer, he said, “It’s a waste of your talents.”

“It’s impossible to waste yourself on your child,” I said. “A kid changes everything.”

He turned his gaze on me, but his eyes seemed to look straight past me, through me, to the bar-length mirror.

“Why’d you quit? What happened?” he said.

“After your sister left me, I thought I could deal with it. I used to love my work. Those early years. I picked up where you and I left off, tasting everything I could. I think I memorized whole swaths of Lichine and Broadbent.”

“I sent you those books.”

“Did you? I don’t remember. Maybe you did. You were very generous. I’m sure your letters got me the distributor job and my first gig as a sommelier. You were already famous.”

“Hardly. I’d only just started the newsletter.”

“Well, people knew about it,” I said, carefully peeling a lemon in a single, continuous spiral with a stripper. “Anyway, something changed after Janie split. Everything and everyone irritated me. I finally snapped one night. A customer I knew pretty well, a typical venture capital type, had his nose stuck in one of your newsletters and wanted to quibble that the bottle I’d brought to the table had failed to fetch ninety points.”

Wilson smiled, pleased with himself. “What did you say?”

“I told him I knew you, that we tasted nearly every week together when we were kids, that there was a whole style of winemaking you write off.”

“That’s nonsense,” he protested.

“I told him to get his head out of his ass and his nose out of your newsletter and trust me.”

One of the old drunks who was eavesdropping couldn’t suppress a laugh.

“You ever hear the maxim ‘The customer’s always right?’” Richard was offended by the story, but it wasn’t the customer’s happiness that concerned him. I had impugned his reputation. “So, what happened?” he asked.

“He was about to get up from the table to speak to the manager, but I told him to relax, beat him to it, and tendered my resignation.”

Wilson shook his head, woefully disappointed in me. Digging his nails into a rut on the scarred oak of the bar, he dropped his voice and said, “Listen, there’s something I need to talk to you about.” He glanced around the room, aware now that the barflies were following our conversation. “In private. If you’re not coming to Europe, can you at least run down to Norton with me? We could talk.”

“You gonna drive?”

“I can’t bring you back. I’m already late, and I have . . . an engagement tonight.”

The way he said it suggested a woman might be involved. He tapped the stem of his glass impatiently with a fingernail.

“All right,” I said. “But only for an hour or so. Janie’s bringing Danny up tomorrow for the weekend, and I have to get the trailer ready.”

“You live in a trailer?” he said incredulously.

“It’s charming,” I said.

“Jesus, Babe, you’ve really gone off the deep end.”

“You go ahead. I have to wait for my partner to spell me. I’ll catch up with you.”

**As I finished** my sidework, I reflected on my history with Wilson. We’d first met in Kermit Lynch’s wineshop, studying each other. Richard was thinner then but muscular, and he moved with the lumbering grace of an athlete as he wandered the store. He had a full head of dark brown hair back then and a broad forehead, but the nose was always his most prominent feature. It looked as if it were designed to be inserted into a wineglass. He took great care as he read the labels, his attention slow and methodical. Then, as we were checking out, he asked casually if I ever tasted in a group. I didn’t welcome the distraction, I told him. He nodded, as if he understood implicitly, and asked if I’d like to taste with him, just the two of us.

Looking back, it had all the inevitability of a romance. We were that in synch. Richard’s the only person I ever met who could remember everything he’d ever tasted, and in those days, we agreed on almost everything.

Frank Mulligan walked in with signature bravura a few minutes after Wilson left.

“You just missed my brother-in-law,” I said.

“Wilson? Here?” Mulligan found it hard to believe.

“Yeah, didn’t you know that Pancho’s is now a fixture on the wine route?”

“Finally!” Mulligan laughed, then, glancing around our broken-down hole in the wall and, finding it in pristine condition, said, “Thank you, my friend. Perfect, as always.”

**Winery visits were** a thing of my past. I’d never been to Norton, but I knew where it was. I took the Silverado Trail down the east side of the valley.

Why *had* I quit? What had happened to me?

Just as fruit ripens, it rots. By the time I walked that night in Seattle, I was disgusted by the pretension, the posturing, the

bullshit. Fed up with sophomoric wine writing and the endless plays for power, I blamed it on the trade. But the truth was, I was symptomatic of what had befallen the industry. Worse, I'd allowed myself to become more committed to my career than to my own kid. That definitely made it time to throw in the proverbial bar towel.

**Norton was a** sprawling facility done up in wine country moderne, all steel and beams, weathered barn board, and rough-hewn stone. A gravel drive ascended through a stand of poplars. The parking lot was nearly empty, hardly surprising given the hour of day and time of year. I walked through the front door. A sign on the reception desk read DURING HARVEST, BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. I stood there momentarily, not sure where my former brother-in-law had gone. I was contemplating a still life on the wall behind a side table, calculating that its value exceeded my total net worth, when a young woman craned her head through a doorway.

"You're Babe, right?" she said. "I recognize you from the bar. Nice, huh?" she added, following my eyes to the painting.

"Form is never more than an extension of content," I said, but I wasn't talking about art. A grape in its skin had nothing on her. If she was Wilson's pretext for blowing me off that evening, I couldn't blame him.

"Follow me," she said, raising an eyebrow.

She led me down a hallway. It ended at an opening that gave on to the winery, and I could see the crew cleaning up after a long day of hauling and crushing fruit. All I could hear was Spanish. She stopped midway down the hall and opened a door to what doubled as a conference and tasting room. Wilson was already seated, a half dozen bottles arrayed before him, each with its own glass. Colin Norton stood at the end of the table.

"Hey, Babe," he said with jocular familiarity. He possessed boyish good looks and wore jeans, running shoes, and a peach-colored polo shirt with its collar turned up.

"Hey, Colin," I said.

"I had no idea," he said, obviously referring to my relationship with the esteemed Richard Wilson. My stock had suddenly increased exponentially.

I'd never much cared for Norton. Every bar has its resident band, and Pancho's was no exception. At certain times and in certain places, a rock and roll band is like a black hole, attracting every musical mediocrity in its gravitational pull, and the lines of Pancho's coterie of losers, never very clear to begin with, possessed a fluidity that saw all sorts come and go. Colin occasionally sat in on the drums, and he played them, or thought he did, in the same heavy-handed style with which he made wine—a steady, monotonous thumping of the bass with a sudden flourish of cymbals for effect. Why Wilson would be enamored of his wines escaped me.

They'd finished with small talk, and Norton was walking him through the lineup, describing what he wanted to achieve stylistically. I had no interest but took a seat. Colin put a set of stems in front of me as he waxed rhapsodically about his latest experiment, a Sangiovese Cab blend. I dutifully took a sip. If there were Sangiovese anywhere in the glass, I couldn't find it. Nor could I figure out how Wilson and I were going to talk about anything with Norton standing there.

A moment later we heard a knock, and a young man stuck his head in the door. He appeared tongue-tied and simply stared at Wilson as if he were some kind of exotic sea creature.

"What do you need, Jean?" Norton asked.

"I . . . nothing," he said, poofing his lips.

"You guys done back there?" Norton said.

"Francisco is cleaning up. I have to take off. *C'est bien?*" He spoke with a thick French accent.

"Yeah, get out of here. It's fine."

"I am going to my sister's," the young man said. He took a last look at Wilson, nodded, and shut the door.

Wilson didn't notice a thing. He was concentrating on the wines, moving from glass to glass, sniffing and scribbling away.

"A young French kid," Norton said to me. "Doing an internship."

"Look," I said to both of them, "I have to take off myself." Wilson came out of his trance. "I have to get ready for my son's visit," I explained to Norton.

"But I thought . . ." Wilson started.

“You’re busy,” I said. “Unless you want to swing by the bar in the morning. I open, so I’m there by ten. Nobody’ll be around.” I waited for an answer.

“Okay, I’ll call you. It’s important,” he said.

“I’m sure it is,” I said as I jotted my cell number on the sheet Norton had set out for tasting notes and handed it to Richard. *But not important enough to interrupt your tasting or cancel your date tonight,* I wanted to say.

I thanked Norton and let myself out. Silence had descended on the winery. Everyone had left, it seemed, for a few hours of sleep before heading out to the vineyards and doing it all over again.