

INGO RADEMACHER

JULIE SANDS

CULLEN DOUGLAS

STEPHEN KING'S

GOTHAM
CAFÉ



DEATH DU JOUR

LUNCH AT THE GOTHAM CAFE

Stephen King

One day when I was in New York, I walked past a very nice-looking restaurant. Inside, the maitre d' was showing a couple to their table. The couple was arguing. The maitre d' caught my eye and tipped me what may have been the most cynical wink in the universe. I went back to my hotel and wrote this story. For the three days it was in work, I was totally possessed by it. For me what makes it go isn't the crazy maitre d' but the spooky relationship between the divorcing couple. In their own way, they're crazier than he is. By far.

One day I came home from the brokerage house where I worked and found a letter—more of a note, actually—from my wife on the dining room table. It said she was leaving me, that she was pursuing a divorce, that I would hear from her lawyer. I sat on the chair at the kitchen end of the table, reading this communication over and over again, not able to believe it. After awhile I got up, went into the bedroom, and looked in the closet. All her clothes were gone except for one pair of sweatpants and a joke sweatshirt someone had given her, with the words RICH BLONDE printed on the front in spangly stuff.

I went back to the dining room table (which was actually at one end of the living room; it was only a four-room apartment) and read the six sentences over again. It was the same, but looking into the half-empty bedroom closet had started me on the way to believing what it said. It was a chilly piece of work, that note. There was no “Love” or “Good luck” or even “Best” at the bottom of it. “Take care of yourself” was as warm as it got. Just below that she had scratched her name, Diane.

I walked into the kitchen, poured myself a glass of orange juice, then knocked it onto the floor when I tried to pick it up. The juice sprayed onto the lower cabinets and the glass broke. I knew I would cut myself if I tried to pick up the glass—my hands were shaking—but I picked it up anyway, and I cut myself. Two places, neither deep. I kept thinking that it was a joke, then realizing it wasn't. Diane wasn't much of a joker. But the thing was, I didn't see it coming. I didn't have a clue. I didn't know if that made me stupid or insensitive. As

the days passed and I thought about the last six or eight months of our two-year marriage, I realized I had been both.

That night I called her folks in Pound Ridge and asked if Diane was there. "She is, and she doesn't want to talk to you," her mother said. "Don't call back." The phone went dead in my ear.

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Two days later I got a call at work from Diane's lawyer, who introduced himself as William Humboldt, and, after ascertaining that he was indeed speaking to Steven Davis, began calling me Steve. I suppose that's a little hard to believe, but it's what happened. Lawyers are so bizarre.

Humboldt told me I would be receiving "preliminary paperwork" early the following week, and suggested I prepare "an account overview prefatory to dissolving your domestic corporation." He also advised me not to make any "sudden fiduciary movements" and suggested that I keep all receipts for items purchased, even the smallest, during this "financially difficult passage." Last of all, he suggested that I find myself a lawyer.

"Listen a minute, would you?" I asked. I was sitting at my desk with my head down and my left hand curled around my forehead. My eyes were shut so I wouldn't have to look into the bright gray socket of my computer screen. I'd been crying a lot, and my eyes felt like they were full of sand.

"Of course," he said. "Happy to listen, Steve."

"I've got two things for you. First, you mean 'preparatory to ending your marriage,' not 'prefatory to dissolving your domestic corporation' ... and if Diane thinks I'm going to try and cheat her out of what's hers, she's wrong."

"Yes," Humboldt said, not indicating agreement but that he understood my point.

“Second, you’re her lawyer, not mine. I find you calling me by my first name patronizing and insensitive. Do it again on the phone and I’ll hang up on you. Do it to my face and I’ll probably try to punch your lights out.”

“Steve ... Mr. Davis ... I hardly think—”

I hung up on him. It was the first thing I’d done that gave me any pleasure since finding that note on the dining room table, with her three apartment keys on top of it to hold it down.

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That afternoon I talked to a friend in the legal department, and he recommended a friend of his who did divorce work. The divorce lawyer was John Ring, and I made an appointment with him for the following day. I went home from the office as late as I could, walked back and forth through the apartment for awhile, decided to go out to a movie, couldn’t find anything I wanted to see, tried the television, couldn’t find anything there to look at, either, and did some more walking. And at some point I found myself in the bedroom, standing in front of an open window fourteen floors above the street, and chucking out all my cigarettes, even the stale old pack of Viceroy’s from the very back of my top desk drawer, a pack that had probably been there for ten years or more—since before I had any idea there was such a creature as Diane Coslaw in the world, in other words.

Although I’d been smoking between twenty and forty cigarettes a day for twenty years, I don’t remember any sudden decision to quit, nor any dissenting interior opinions—not even a mental suggestion that maybe two days after your wife walks out is not the optimum time to quit smoking. I just stuffed the full carton, the half carton, and the two or three half-used packs I found lying around out the window and into the dark. Then I shut the window (it never once occurred to me that it might have been more efficient to throw the user out instead of the product; it was never that kind of situation), lay down on my bed, and closed my eyes. As I drifted off, it occurred to me that tomorrow was probably going to be one of the worst days of my life. It further

occurred to me that I would probably be smoking again by noon. I was right about the first thing, wrong about the second.

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The next ten days—the time during which I was going through the worst of the physical withdrawal from nicotine—were difficult and often unpleasant, but perhaps not as bad as I had thought they would be. And although I was on the verge of smoking dozens—no, hundreds—of times, I never did. There were moments when I thought I would go insane if I didn't have a cigarette, and when I passed people on the street who were smoking I felt like screaming Give that to me, motherfucker, that's mine! at them, but I didn't.

For me, the worst times were late at night. I think (but I'm not sure; all my thought processes from around the time Diane left are very blurry in my mind) I had an idea that I would sleep better if I quit, but I didn't. I lay awake some mornings until three, hands laced together under my pillow, looking up at the ceiling, listening to sirens and to the rumble of trucks headed downtown. At those times I would think about the twenty-four-hour Korean market almost directly across the street from my building. I would think about the white fluorescent light inside, so bright it was almost like a Kubler-Ross near-death experience, and how it spilled out onto the sidewalk between the displays which, in another hour, two young Korean men in white paper hats would begin to fill with fruit. I would think about the older man behind the counter, also Korean, also in a paper hat, and the formidable racks of cigarettes behind him, as big as the stone tablets Charlton Heston brought down from Mount Sinai in The Ten Commandments. I would think about getting up, dressing, going over there, getting a pack of cigarettes (or maybe nine or ten of them), and sitting by the window, smoking one Marlboro after another as the sky lightened to the east and the sun came up. I never did, but on many early mornings I went to sleep counting cigarette brands instead of sheep: Winston ... Winston 100s ... Virginia Slims ... Doral ... Merit ... Merit 100s ... Camels ... Camel Filters ... Camel Lights.

Later—around the time I was starting to see the last three or four months of our marriage in a clearer light, as a matter of fact—I began to understand that my decision to quit smoking when I did was perhaps not so unconsidered as it at first seemed, and a very long way from ill-considered. I'm not a brilliant man, not a brave one, either, but that decision might have been both. It's certainly possible; sometimes we rise above ourselves. In any case, it gave my mind something concrete to pitch upon in the days after Diane left; it gave my misery a vocabulary it would not otherwise have had.

Of course I have speculated that quitting when I did may have played a part in what happened at the Gotham Cafe that day, and I'm sure there's some truth to that. But who can foresee such things? None of us can predict the final outcomes of our actions, and few of us even try; most of us just do what we do to prolong a moment's pleasure or to stop the pain. And even when we act for the noblest reasons, the last link of the chain all too often drips with someone's blood.

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Humboldt called me again two weeks after the evening when I'd bombed West Eighty-third Street with my cigarettes, and this time he stuck with Mr. Davis as a form of address. He thanked me for the copies of various documents forwarded him through Mr. Ring and said that the time had come for "all four of us" to sit down to lunch. All four of us meant Diane. I hadn't seen her since the morning of the day she'd left, and even then I hadn't really seen her; she'd been sleeping with her face buried in her pillow. I hadn't even talked to her. My heart speeded up in my chest, and I could feel a pulse tapping away in the wrist of the hand holding the telephone.

"There are a number of details to be worked out, and a number of pertinent arrangements to be discussed, and this seems to be the time to put that process in work," Humboldt said. He chuckled fatly in my ear, like a repulsive adult giving a child some minor treat. "It's always best to let some time pass before bringing the principals

together, a little cooling-off period, but in my judgement a face-to-face meeting at this time would facilitate—”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You’re talking about—”

“Lunch,” he said. “The day after tomorrow? Can you clear that on your schedule?” Of course you can, his voice said. Just to see her again ... to experience the slightest touch of her hand. Eh, Steve?

“I don’t have anything on for lunch Thursday anyhow, so that’s not a problem. And I should bring my lawyer?”

The fat chuckle came again, shivering in my ear like something just turned out of a Jell-O mold. “I imagine Mr. Ring would like to be included, yes.”

“Did you have a place in mind?” I wondered for a moment who would be paying for this lunch, and then had to smile at my own naivete. I reached into my pocket for a cigarette and poked the tip of a toothpick under my thumbnail instead. I winced, brought the pick out, checked the tip for blood, saw none, and stuck it in my mouth.

Humboldt had said something, but I had missed it. The sight of the toothpick had reminded me all over again that I was floating smokeless on the waves of the world.

“Pardon me?”

“I asked if you know the Gotham Cafe on Fifty-third Street,” he said, sounding a touch impatient now. “Between Madison and Park.”

“No, but I’m sure I can find it.”

“Noon?”

“Noon’s fine,” I said, and thought of telling him to tell Diane to wear the green dress with the little black speckles and the slit up the side. “I’ll just check with my lawyer.” It occurred to me that that was a pompous, hateful little phrase, one I couldn’t wait to stop using.

“Do that, and call me back if there’s a problem.”

I called John Ring, who hemmed and hawed enough to justify his retainer (not outrageous, but considerable) and then said he supposed a meeting was in order “at this time.”

I hung up, settled back in front of my computer terminal, and wondered how I was possibly going to be able to meet Diane again without at least one cigarette beforehand.

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On the morning of our scheduled lunch, John Ring called and told me he couldn’t make it, and that I would have to cancel. “It’s my mother,” he said, sounding harried. “She fell down the damned stairs and broke her hip. Out in Babylon. I’m leaving now for Penn Station. I’ll have to take the train.” He spoke in the tone of a man saying he’ll have to go by camel across the Gobi.

I thought for a second, jiggling a fresh toothpick between my fingers. Two used ones lay beside my computer terminal, the ends frayed. I was going to have to watch that; it was all too easy to imagine my stomach filling up with sharp little splinterettes. The replacement of one bad habit with another seems almost inevitable, I’ve noticed.

“Steven? Are you there?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry about your mother, but I’m going to keep the lunch-date.”

He sighed, and when he spoke he sounded sympathetic as well as harried. “I understand that you want to see her, and that’s the reason why you have to be very careful, and make no mistakes. You’re not Donald Trump and she’s not Ivana, but this isn’t a no-fault we got here, either, where you get your decree by registered mail. You’ve done very well for yourself, Steven, especially in the last five years.”

“I know, but—”

“And for thuh-ree of those years,” Ring overrode me, now putting on his courtroom voice like an overcoat, “Diane Davis was not your wife, not your live-in companion, and not by any stretch of the imagination your helpmate. She was just Diane Coslaw from Pound Ridge, and she did not go before you tossing flower-petals or blowing a cornet.”

“No, but I want to see her.” And what I was thinking would have driven him mad: I wanted to see if she was wearing the green dress with the black speckles, because she knew damned well it was my favorite.

He sighed again. “I can’t have this discussion, or I’m going to miss my train. There isn’t another one until one-oh-one.”

“Go and catch your train.”

“I will, but first I’m going to make one more effort to get through to you. A meeting like this is like a joust. The lawyers are the knights; the clients are reduced, for the time being, to no more than squires with Sir Barrister’s lance in one hand and the reins of his horse in the other.” His tone suggested that this was an old image, and well-loved. “What you’re telling me is that, since I can’t be there, you’re going to hop on my nag and go galloping at the other guy with no lance, no armor, no faceplate, probably not even a jockstrap.”

“I want to see her,” I said. “I want to see how she is. How she looks. Hey, without you there, maybe Humboldt won’t even want to talk.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be nice,” he said, and came out with a small, cynical laugh. “I’m not going to talk you out of it, am I?”

“No.”

“All right, then I want you to follow certain instructions. If I find out you haven’t, and that you’ve gummed up the works, I may decide it would be simpler to just resign the case. Are you hearing me?”

“I’m hearing you.”

“Good. Don’t yell at her, Steven. That’s big number one. Are you hearing that?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t going to yell at her. If I could quit smoking two days after she had walked out—and stick to it—I thought I could get through a hundred minutes and three courses without calling her a bitch.

“Don’t yell at him, that’s number two.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t just say okay. I know you don’t like him, and he doesn’t like you much, either.”

“He’s never even met me. How can he have an opinion about me one way or another?”

“Don’t be dense,” he said. “He’s being paid to have an opinion, that’s how. So say okay like you mean it.”

“Okay like I mean it.”

“Better.” But he didn’t say it like he really meant it; he said it like a man who is checking his watch.

“Don’t get into substantive matters,” he said. “Don’t discuss financial-settlement issues, not even on a ‘What would you think if I suggested this’ basis. If he gets pissed off and asks why you kept the lunch-date if you weren’t going to discuss nuts and bolts, tell him just what you told me, that you wanted to see your wife again.”

“Okay.”

“And if they leave at that point, can you live with it?”

“Yes.” I didn’t know if I could or not, but I thought I could, and I knew that Ring wanted to catch his train.

“As a lawyer—your lawyer—I’m telling you that this is a bullshit move, and that if it backfires in court, I’ll call a recess just so I can pull you out into the hall and say I told you so. Now have you got that?”

“Yes. Say hello to your mother.”

“Maybe tonight,” Ring said, and now he sounded as if he were rolling his eyes. “I won’t get a word in until then. I have to run, Steven.”

“Okay.”

“I hope she stands you up.”

“I know you do.”

He hung up and went to see his mother, out in Babylon. When I saw him next, a few days later, there was something between us that didn’t quite bear discussion, although I think we would have talked about it if we had known each other even a little bit better. I saw it in his eyes and I suppose he saw it in mine, as well—the knowledge that if his mother hadn’t fallen down the stairs and broken her hip, he might have wound up as dead as William Humboldt.

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I walked from my office to the Gotham Cafe, leaving at eleven-fifteen and arriving across from the restaurant at eleven-forty-five. I got there early for my own peace of mind—to make sure the place was where Humboldt had said it was, in other words. That’s the way I am, and pretty much the way I’ve always been. Diane used to call it my “obsessive streak” when we were first married, but I think that by the end she knew better. I don’t trust the competence of others very easily, that’s all. I realize it’s a pain-in-the-ass characteristic, and I know it drove her crazy, but what she never seemed to realize was that I didn’t exactly love it in myself, either. Some things take longer to change than others, though. And some things you can never change, no matter how hard you try.

The restaurant was right where Humboldt had said it would be, the location marked by a green awning with the words GOTHAM CAFE on it. A white city skyline was traced across the plate-glass windows. It looked New York-trendy. It also looked pretty unamazing, just one of the eight hundred or so pricey restaurants crammed together in midtown.

With the meeting-place located and my mind temporarily set at rest (about that, anyway; I was tense as hell about seeing Diane again and craving a cigarette like mad), I walked up to Madison and browsed in a luggage store for fifteen minutes. Mere window-shopping was no good; if Diane and Humboldt came from uptown, they might see me. Diane was liable to recognize me by the set of my shoulders and the hang of my topcoat even from behind, and I didn't want that. I didn't want them to know I'd arrived early. I thought it might look needy. So I went inside.

I bought an umbrella I didn't need and left the shop at straight up noon by my watch, knowing I could step through the door of the Gotham Cafe at twelve-oh-five. My father's dictum: If you need to be there, show up five minutes early. If they need you to be there, show up five minutes late. I had reached a point where I didn't know who needed what or why or for how long, but my father's dictum seemed like the safest course. If it had been just Diane alone, I think I would have arrived dead on time.

No, that's probably a lie. I suppose if it had just been Diane, I would have gone in at eleven-forty-five, when I first arrived, and waited for her.

I stood under the awning for a moment, looking in. The place was bright, and I marked that down in its favor. I have an intense dislike for dark restaurants where you can't see what you're eating or drinking. The walls were white and hung with vibrant Impressionist drawings. You couldn't tell what they were, but that didn't matter; with their primary colors and broad, exuberant strokes, they hit your eyes like visual caffeine. I looked for Diane and saw a woman that might be her, seated about halfway down the long room and by the wall. It

was hard to say, because her back was turned and I don't have her knack of recognition under difficult circumstances. But the heavysset, balding man she was sitting with certainly looked like a Humboldt. I took a deep breath, opened the restaurant door, and went in.

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There are two phases of withdrawal from tobacco, and I'm convinced that it's the second that causes most cases of recidivism. The physical withdrawal lasts ten days to two weeks, and then most of the symptoms—sweats, headaches, muscle twitches, pounding eyes, insomnia, irritability—disappear. What follows is a much longer period of mental withdrawal. These symptoms may include mild to moderate depression, mourning, some degree of anhedonia (emotional flat-line, in other words), forgetfulness, even a species of transient dyslexia. I know all this stuff because I read up on it. Following what happened at the Gotham Cafe, it seemed very important that I do that. I suppose you'd have to say that my interest in the subject fell somewhere between the Land of Hobbies and the Kingdom of Obsession.

The most common symptom of phase-two withdrawal is a feeling of mild unreality. Nicotine improves synaptic transferral and improves concentration—widens the brain's information highway, in other words. It's not a big boost, and not really necessary to successful thinking (although most confirmed cigarette junkies believe differently), but when you take it away, you're left with a feeling—a pervasive feeling, in my case—that the world has taken on a decidedly dreamy cast. There were many times when it seemed to me that people and cars and the little sidewalk vignettes I observed were actually passing by me on a moving screen, a thing controlled by hidden stagehands turning enormous cranks and revolving enormous drums. It was also a little like being mildly stoned all the time, because the feeling was accompanied by a sense of helplessness and moral exhaustion, a feeling that things had to simply go on the way they were going, for good or for ill, because

you (except of course it's me I'm talking about) were just too damned busy not-smoking to do much of anything else.

I'm not sure how much all this bears on what happened, but I know it has some bearing, because I was pretty sure something was wrong with the maitre d' almost as soon as I saw him, and as soon as he spoke to me, I knew.

He was tall, maybe forty-five, slim (in his tux, at least; in ordinary clothes he probably would have looked skinny), mustached. He had a leather-bound menu in one hand. He looked like battalions of maitre d's in battalions of fancy New York restaurants, in other words. Except for his bow-tie, which was askew, and something on his shirt that was a splotch just above the place where his jacket buttoned. It looked like either gravy or a glob of some dark jelly. Also, several strands of his hair stuck up defiantly in back, making me think of Alfalfa in the old Little Rascals one-reelers. That almost made me burst out laughing—I was very nervous, remember—and I had to bite my lips to keep it in.

“Yes, sir?” he asked as I approached the desk. It came out sounding like *Yais sair?* All maitre d's in New York City have accents, but it is never one you can positively identify. A girl I dated in the mid-eighties, one who did have a sense of humor (along with a fairly large drug habit, unfortunately), told me once that they all grew up on the same little island and hence all spoke the same language.

“What language is it?” I asked her.

“Snooti,” she said, and I cracked up.

This thought came back to me as I looked past the desk to the woman I'd seen while outside—I was now almost positive it was Diane—and I had to bite the insides of my lips again. As a result, Humboldt's name came out of me sounding like a half-smothered sneeze.

The maitre d's high, pale brow contracted in a frown. His eyes bored into mine. I had taken them for brown as I approached the desk, but now they looked black.

"Pardon, sir?" he asked. It came out sounding like Pahdun, sair and looking like Fuck you, Jack. His long fingers, as pale as his brow—concert pianist's fingers, they looked like—tapped nervously on the cover of the menu. The tassel sticking out of it like some sort of half-assed bookmark swung back and forth.

"Humboldt," I said. "Party of three." I found I couldn't take my eyes off his bow-tie, so crooked that the left side of it was almost brushing the shelf under his chin, and that blob on his snowy-white dress shirt. Now that I was closer, it didn't look like either gravy or jelly; it looked like partially dried blood.

He was looking down at his reservations book, the rogue tuft at the back of his head waving back and forth over the rest of his slicked-down hair. I could see his scalp through the grooves his comb had laid down, and a speckle of dandruff on the shoulders of his tux. It occurred to me that a good headwaiter might have fired an underling put together in such sloppy fashion.

"Ah, yes, monsieur." (Ah yais, messoo.) He had found the name. "Your party is—" He was starting to look up. He stopped abruptly, and his eyes sharpened even more, if that was possible, as he looked past me and down. "You cannot bring that dog in here," he said sharply. "How many times have I told you you can't bring that dog in here!"

He didn't quite shout, but spoke so loudly that several of the diners closest to his pulpit-like desk stopped eating and looked around curiously.

I looked around myself. He had been so emphatic I expected to see somebody's dog, but there was no one behind me and most certainly no dog. It occurred to me then, I don't know why, that he was talking about my umbrella, that perhaps on the Island of the Maitre D's, dog

was a slang term for umbrella, especially when carried by a patron on a day when rain did not seem likely.

I looked back at the maitre d' and saw that he had already started away from his desk, holding my menu in his hands. He must have sensed that I wasn't following, because he looked back over his shoulder, eyebrows slightly raised. There was nothing on his face now but polite enquiry—Are you coming, messoo?—and I came. I knew something was wrong with him, but I came. I could not take the time or effort to try to decide what might be wrong with the maitre d' of a restaurant where I had never been before today and where I would probably never be again; I had Humboldt and Diane to deal with, I had to do it without smoking, and the maitre d' of the Gotham Cafe would have to take care of his own problems, dog included.

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Diane turned around and at first I saw nothing in her face and in her eyes but a kind of frozen politeness. Then, just below it, I saw anger, or thought I did. We'd done a lot of arguing during our last three or four months together, but I couldn't recall ever seeing the sort of concealed anger I sensed in her now, anger that was meant to be hidden by the makeup and the new dress (blue, no speckles, no slit up the side) and the new hairdo. The heavysset man she was with was saying something, and she reached out and touched his arm. As he turned toward me, beginning to get to his feet, I saw something else in her face. She was afraid of me as well as angry with me. And although she hadn't said a single word, I was already furious at her. Everything on her face and in her eyes was negative; she might as well have been wearing a CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE sign on her forehead. I thought I deserved better.

"Monsieur," the maitre d' said, pulling out the chair to Diane's left. I barely heard him, and certainly any thought of his eccentric behavior and crooked bow-tie had left my head. I think that even the subject of tobacco had briefly vacated my head for the first time since I'd quit smoking. I could only consider the careful composure of her face and marvel at how I could be angry with her and still want her so much it

made me ache to look at her. Absence may or may not make the heart grow fonder, but it certainly freshens the eye.

I also found time to wonder if I had really seen all I'd surmised. Anger? Yes, that was possible, even likely. If she hadn't been angry with me to at least some degree, she never would have left in the first place, I supposed. But afraid? Why in God's name would Diane be afraid of me? I'd never laid a single finger on her. Yes, I suppose I had raised my voice during some of our arguments, but so had she.

"Enjoy your lunch, monsieur," the maitre d' said from some other universe—the one where service people usually stay, only poking their heads into ours when we call them, either because we need something or to complain.

"Mr. Davis, I'm Bill Humboldt," Diane's companion said. He held out a large hand that looked reddish and chapped. I shook it briefly. The rest of him was as big as his hand, and his broad face wore the sort of flush habitual drinkers often get after the first one of the day. I put him in his mid-forties, about ten years away from the time when his sagging cheeks would turn into jowls.

"Pleasure," I said, not thinking about what I was saying any more than I was thinking about the maitre d' with the blob on his shirt, only wanting to get the hand-shaking part over so I could turn back to the pretty blonde with the rose-and-cream complexion, the pale pink lips, and the trim, slim figure. The woman who had, not so long ago, liked to whisper "Do me do me do me" in my ear while she held onto my ass like a saddle with two pommels.

"Where is Mr. Ring?" Humboldt asked, looking around (a bit theatrically, I thought).

"Mr. Ring is on his way to Long Island. His mother fell downstairs and broke her hip."

"Oh, wonderful," Humboldt said. He picked up the half-finished martini in front of him on the table and drained it until the olive with

the toothpick in it rested against his lips. He spat it back, then set the glass down and looked at me. “And I bet I can guess what he told you.”

I heard this but paid no attention. For the time being, Humboldt was no more important than minor static on a radio program you really want to hear. I looked at Diane instead. It was marvellous, really, how she looked smarter and prettier than previous. As if she had learned things—yes, even after only two weeks of separation, and while living with Ernie and Dee Dee Coslaw in Pound Ridge—that I could never know.

“How are you, Steve?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said. Then, “Not so fine, actually. I’ve missed you.”

Only watchful silence from the lady greeted this. Those big blue-green eyes looking at me, no more. Certainly no return serve, no I’ve missed you, too.

“And I quit smoking. That’s also played hell with my peace of mind.”

“Did you, finally? Good for you.”

I felt another flash of anger, this time a really ugly one, at her politely dismissive tone. As if I might not be telling the truth, but it didn’t really matter if I was. She’d carped at me about the cigarettes every day for two years, it seemed—how they were going to give me cancer, how they were going to give her cancer, how she wouldn’t even consider getting pregnant until I stopped, so I could just save any breath I might have been planning to waste on that subject—and now all at once it didn’t matter anymore, because I didn’t matter anymore.

“We have a little business to transact,” Humboldt said. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

There was one of those big, boxy lawyer suitcases on the floor beside him. He picked it up with a grunt and set it on the chair where my lawyer would have been if his mother hadn't broken her hip. Humboldt began unsnapping the clasps, but I quit paying attention at that point. The fact was, I did mind. It wasn't a matter of caution, either; it was a matter of priorities. I felt an instant's gratitude that Ring had been called away. It had certainly clarified the issues.

I looked at Diane and said, "I want to try again. Can we reconcile? Is there any chance of that?"

The look of absolute horror on her face crashed hopes I hadn't even known I'd been holding onto. Instead of answering, she looked past me at Humboldt.

"You said we didn't have to talk about this!" Her voice was trembling, accusatory. "You said you wouldn't even let it come up!"

Humboldt looked a little flustered. He shrugged and glanced briefly down at his empty martini glass before looking back up at Diane. I think he was wishing he'd ordered a double. "I didn't know Mr. Davis would be attending this meeting without his lawyer. You should have called me, Mr. Davis. Since you did not, I feel it necessary to inform you that Diane did not greenlight this meeting with any thoughts of reconciliation in mind. Her decision to seek a divorce is final."

He glanced at her briefly, seeking confirmation, and got it. She was nodding emphatically. Her cheeks were considerably brighter than they had been when I sat down, and it was not the sort of flush I associate with embarrassment. "You bet it is," she said, and I saw that furious look on her face again.

"Diane, why?" I hated the plaintive note I heard in my voice, a sound almost like a sheep's bleat, but there wasn't a goddamned thing I could do about it. "Why?"

"Oh Jesus," she said. "Are you telling me you really don't know?"

“Yes—”

Her cheeks were brighter than ever, the flush now rising almost to her temples. “No, probably you don’t. Isn’t that typical.” She picked up her water and spilled the top two inches on the tablecloth because her hand was trembling. I flashed back at once—I mean kapow—to the day she’d left, remembering how I’d knocked the glass of orange juice onto the floor and how I’d cautioned myself not to try picking up the broken pieces of glass until my hands had settled down, and how I’d gone ahead anyway and cut myself for my pains.

“Stop it, this is counterproductive,” Humboldt said. He sounded like a playground monitor trying to prevent a scuffle before it gets started, but his eyes were sweeping the rear part of the room, looking for our waiter, or any waiter whose eye he could catch. He was a lot less interested in us, at that particular moment, than he was in obtaining what the British like to call “the other half.”

“I just want to know—” I began.

“What you want to know doesn’t have anything to do with why we’re here,” Humboldt said, and for a moment he sounded as sharp and alert as he probably had been when he first strode out of law school with his diploma in his hand.

“Yes, right, finally,” Diane said. She spoke in a brittle, urgent voice. “Finally it’s not about what you want, what you need.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I’m willing to listen,” I said. “We could try counselling, I’m not against it if maybe—”

She raised her hands to shoulder-level, palms out. “Oh God, Mr. Macho’s gone New Age,” she said, then dropped her hands back into her lap. “After all the days you rode off into the sunset, tall in the saddle. Say it ain’t so, Joe.”

“Stop it,” Humboldt told her. He looked from his client to his client’s soon-to-be ex-husband (it was going to happen, all right; even the slight unreality that comes with not-smoking couldn’t conceal that self-evident truth from me by that point). “One more word from either of you and I’m going to declare this luncheon at an end.” He gave us a small smile, one so obviously manufactured that I found it perversely endearing. “And we haven’t even heard the specials yet.”

That—the first mention of food since I’d joined them—was just before the bad things started to happen, and I remember smelling salmon from one of the nearby tables. In the two weeks since I’d quit smoking, my sense of smell had become incredibly sharp, but I do not count that as much of a blessing, especially when it comes to salmon. I used to like it, but now I can’t abide the smell of it, let alone the taste. To me it smells of pain and fear and blood and death.

“He started it,” Diane said sulkily.

You started it, you were the one who walked out, I thought, but I kept it to myself. Humboldt clearly meant what he said; he would take Diane by the hand and walk her out of the restaurant if we started that schoolyard no-I-didn’t, yes-you-did shit. Not even the prospect of another drink would hold him here.

“Okay,” I said mildly ... and I had to work hard to achieve that mild tone, believe me. “I started it. What’s next?” I knew, of course; papers, papers, papers. And probably the only satisfaction I was going to get out of this sorry situation was telling them that I wasn’t going to sign any, or even look at any, on the advice of my lawyer. I glanced at Diane again, but she was looking down at her empty plate and her hair hid her face. I felt a strong urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake her inside her new blue dress like a pebble inside of a gourd. Do you think you’re in this alone? I would shout at her. Do you think you’re in this alone? Well, the Marlboro Man has got news for you, sweetheart—you’re a stubborn, self-indulgent little bi—

“Mr. Davis?” Humboldt asked politely.

I looked around at him.

“There you are,” he said. “I thought we’d lost you again.”

“Not at all,” I said.

“Good. Lovely.”

He had several sheafs of paper in his hands. They were held together by those paperclips that come in different colors—red, blue, yellow, purple. They went well with the Impressionist drawings on the walls of the Gotham Cafe. It occurred to me that I had come abysmally unprepared for this meeting, and not just because my lawyer was on the twelve-thirty-three to Babylon, either. Diane had her new dress; Humboldt had his Brinks truck of a briefcase, plus documents held together by color-coded paperclips; all I had was a new umbrella on a sunny day. I looked down at where it lay beside my chair (it had never crossed my mind to check it) and saw there was still a price-tag dangling from the handle. All at once I felt like Minnie Pearl.

The room smelled wonderful, as most restaurants do since they banned smoking in them—of flowers and wine and fresh coffee and chocolate and pastry—but what I smelled most clearly was salmon. I remember thinking that it smelled very good, and that I would probably order some. I also remember thinking that if I could eat at a meeting like this, I could probably eat anywhere.

“I have here a number of forms which will allow both you and Ms. Davis to remain financially mobile while assuring that neither of you will have unfair access to the funds you’ve both worked so hard to accumulate,” Humboldt said. “I also have preliminary court notifications which need to be signed by you, and forms that will allow us to put your bonds and T-bills in an escrow account until your current situation is settled by the court.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn’t going to sign anything, and if that meant the meeting was over so be it, but I didn’t get out so

much as a single word. Before I could, I was interrupted by the maitre d'. He was screaming as well as talking, and I've tried to indicate that, but a bunch of e's strung together can't really convey the quality of that sound. It was as if he had a bellyful of steam and a teakettle whistle caught in his throat.

"That dog ... Eeeeeee! ... I told you time and again about that dog ... Eeeeeee! ... All that time I can't sleep ... Eeeeeee! ... She says cut your face, that cunt ... Eeeeeee! ... How you tease me! ... Eeeeeee! ... And now you bring that dog in here ... Eeeeeee!"

The room fell silent at once, of course, diners looking up in astonishment from their meals or their conversations as the thin, pale, black-clad figure came stalking across the room with its face outthrust and its long, storklike legs scissoring. The maitre d's bow-tie had turned a full ninety degrees from its normal position, so it now looked like the hands of a clock indicating the hour of six. His hands were clasped behind his back as he walked, and bent forward slightly from the waist as he was, he made me think of a drawing in my sixth-grade literature book, an illustration of Washington Irving's unfortunate schoolteacher, Ichabod Crane.

It was me he was looking at, me he was approaching. I stared at him, feeling almost hypnotized—it was like one of those dreams where you discover that you haven't studied for the exam you're supposed to take or that you're attending a White House dinner in your honor with no clothes on—and I might have stayed that way if Humboldt hadn't moved.

I heard his chair scrape back and glanced at him. He was standing up, his napkin held loosely in one hand. He looked surprised, but he also looked furious. I suddenly realized two things: that he was drunk, quite drunk, in fact, and that he saw this as a smirch on both his hospitality and his competence. He had chosen the restaurant, after all, and now look—the master of ceremonies had gone bonkers.

"Eeeeeee! ... I teach you! For the last time I teach you ..."

“Oh my God, he’s wet his pants,” a woman at a nearby table murmured. Her voice was low but perfectly audible in the silence as the maitre d’ drew in a fresh breath with which to scream, and I saw she was right. The crotch of the skinny man’s dress pants was soaked.

“See here, you idiot,” Humboldt said, turning to face him, and the maitre d’ brought his left hand out from behind his back. In it was the largest butcher-knife I have ever seen. It had to have been two feet long, with the top part of its cutting edge slightly belled, like a cutlass in an old pirate movie.

“Look out!” I yelled at Humboldt, and at one of the tables against the wall a skinny man in rimless spectacles screamed, ejecting a mouthful of chewed brown fragments of food onto the tablecloth in front of him.

Humboldt seemed to hear neither my yell nor the other man’s scream. He was frowning thunderously at the maitre d’. “You don’t need to expect to see me in here again if this is the way—” Humboldt began.

“Eeeeeee! EEEEEEEEE!” the maitre d’ screamed, and swung the butcher-knife flat through the air. It made a kind of whickering sound, like a whispered sentence. The period was the sound of the blade burying itself in William Humboldt’s right cheek. Blood exploded out of the wound in a furious spray of tiny droplets. They decorated the tablecloth in a fan-shaped stipplework, and I clearly saw (I will never forget it) one bright red drop fall into my waterglass and then dive for the bottom with a pinkish filament like a tail stretching out behind it. It looked like a bloody tadpole.

Humboldt’s cheek snapped open, revealing his teeth, and as he clapped his hand to the gouting wound, I saw something pinkish-white lying on the shoulder of his charcoal-gray suitcoat. It wasn’t until the whole thing was over that I realized it must have been his earlobe.

“Tell this in your ears!” the maitre d’ screamed furiously at Diane’s bleeding lawyer, who stood there with one hand clapped to his cheek. Except for the blood pouring over and between his fingers, Humboldt looked weirdly like Jack Benny doing one of his famous double-takes. “Call this to your hateful tattle-tale friends of the street ... you misery ... Eeeeeeee! ... DOG-LOVER!”

Now other people were screaming, mostly at the sight of the blood. Humboldt was a big man, and he was bleeding like a stuck pig. I could hear it pattering on the floor like water from a broken pipe, and the front of his white shirt was now red. His tie, which had been red to start with, was now black.

“Steve?” Diane said. “Steven?”

A man and a woman had been having lunch at the table behind her and slightly to her left. Now the man—about thirty and handsome in the way George Hamilton used to be—bolted to his feet and ran toward the front of the restaurant. “Troy, don’t go without me!” his date screamed, but Troy never looked back. He’d forgotten all about a library book he was supposed to return, it seemed, or maybe about how he’d promised to wax the car.

If there had been a paralysis in the room—I can’t actually say if there was or not, although I seem to have seen a great deal, and to remember it all—that broke it. There were more screams and other people got up. Several tables were overturned. Glasses and china shattered on the floor. I saw a man with his arm around the waist of his female companion hurry past behind the maitre d’; her hand was clamped into his shoulder like a claw. For a moment her eyes met mine, and they were as empty as the eyes of a Greek bust. Her face was dead pale, haglike with horror.

All of this might have happened in ten seconds, or maybe twenty. I remember it like a series of photographs or filmstrips, but it has no timeline. Time ceased to exist for me at the moment Alfalfa the maitre d’ brought his left hand out from behind his back and I saw the butcher-knife. During that time, the man in the tuxedo continued

to spew out a confusion of words in his special maitre d's language, the one that old girlfriend of mine had called Snooti. Some of it really was in a foreign language, some of it was English but completely without sense, and some of it was striking ... almost haunting. Have you ever read any of Dutch Schultz's long, confused deathbed statement? It was like that. Much of it I can't remember. What I can remember I suppose I'll never forget.

Humboldt staggered backward, still holding his lacerated cheek. The backs of his knees struck the seat of his chair and he sat down heavily on it. He looks like someone who's just been told he's disinherited, I thought. He started to turn toward Diane and me, his eyes wide and shocked. I had time to see there were tears spilling out of them, and then the maitre d' wrapped both hands around the handle of the butcher-knife and buried it in the center of Humboldt's head. It made a sound like someone whacking a pile of towels with a cane.

"Boot!" Humboldt cried. I'm quite sure that's what his last word on planet Earth was—"boot." Then his weeping eyes rolled up to whites and he slumped forward onto his plate, sweeping his own glassware off the table and onto the floor with one outflung hand. As this happened, the maitre d'—all his hair was sticking up in back, now, not just some of it—pried the long knife out of his head. Blood sprayed out of the headwound in a kind of vertical curtain, and splashed the front of Diane's dress. She raised her hands to her shoulders with the palms turned out once again, but this time it was in horror rather than exasperation. She shrieked, and then clapped her bloodspattered hands to her face, over her eyes. The maitre d' paid no attention to her. Instead, he turned to me.

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"That dog of yours," he said, speaking in an almost conversational tone. He registered absolutely no interest in or even knowledge of the screaming, terrified people stampeding behind him toward the doors. His eyes were very large, very dark. They looked brown to me again, but there seemed to be black circles around the irises. "That

dog of yours is so much rage. All the radios of Coney Island don't make up to dat dog, you motherfucker."

I had the umbrella in my hand, and the one thing I can't remember, no matter how hard I try, is when I grabbed it. I think it must have been while Humboldt was standing transfixed by the realization that his mouth had been expanded by eight inches or so, but I simply can't remember. I remember the man who looked like George Hamilton bolting for the door, and I know his name was Troy because that's what his companion called after him, but I can't remember picking up the umbrella I'd bought in the luggage store. It was in my hand, though, the price-tag sticking out of the bottom of my fist, and when the maitre d' bent forward as if bowing and ran the knife through the air at me—meaning, I think, to bury it in my throat—I raised it and brought it down on his wrist, like an old-time teacher whacking an unruly pupil with his hickory stick.

"Ud!" the maitre d' grunted as his hand was driven sharply down and the blade meant for my throat ploughed through the soggy pinkish tablecloth instead. He held on, though, and pulled it back. If I'd tried to hit his knife-hand again I'm sure I would have missed, but I didn't. I swung at his face, and fetched him an excellent lick—as excellent a lick as one can administer with an umbrella, anyway—up the side of his head. And as I did, the umbrella popped open like the visual punchline of a slapstick act.

I didn't think it was funny, though. The bloom of the umbrella hid him from me completely as he staggered backward with his free hand flying up to the place where I'd hit him, and I didn't like not being able to see him. In fact, it terrified me. Not that I wasn't terrified already.

I grabbed Diane's wrist and yanked her to her feet. She came without a word, took a step toward me, then stumbled on her high heels and fell clumsily into my arms. I was aware of her breasts pushing against me, and the wet, warm clamminess over them.

"Eeeee! You boinker!" the maitre d' screamed, or perhaps it was a "boinger" he called me. It probably doesn't matter, I know that, and

yet it quite often seems to me that it does. Late at night, the little questions haunt me as much as the big ones. “You boinking bastard! All these radios! Hush-do-baba! Fuck Cousin Brucie! Fuck YOU!”

He started around the table toward us (the area behind him was completely empty now, and looked like the aftermath of a brawl in a western movie saloon). My umbrella was still lying on the table with the opened top jutting off the far side, and the maitre d’ bumped it with his hip. It fell off in front of him, and while he kicked it aside, I set Diane back on her feet and pulled her toward the far side of the room. The front door was no good; it was probably too far away in any case, but even if we could get there, it was still jammed tight with frightened, screaming people. If he wanted me—or both of us—he would have no trouble catching us and carving us like a couple of turkeys.

“Bugs! You bugs! ... Eeeeeee! ... So much for your dog, eh? So much for your barking dog!”

“Make him stop!” Diane screamed. “Oh Jesus, he’s going to kill us both, make him stop!”

“I rot you, you abominations!” Closer, now. The umbrella hadn’t held him up for long, that was for sure. “I rot you and all your trulls!”

I saw three doors, two of them facing each other in a small alcove where there was also a pay telephone. Men’s and women’s rooms. No good. Even if they were single toilets with locks on the doors, they were no good. A nut like this one behind us would have no trouble bashing a bathroom lock off its screws, and we would have nowhere to run.

I dragged her toward the third door and shoved through it into a world of clean green tiles, strong fluorescent light, gleaming chrome, and steamy odors of food. The smell of salmon dominated. Humboldt had never gotten a chance to ask about the specials, but I thought I knew what at least one of them had been.

A waiter was standing there with a loaded tray balanced on the flat of one hand, his mouth agape and his eyes wide. He looked like Gimpel the Fool in that Isaac Singer story. “What—” he said, and then I shoved him aside. The tray went flying, with plates and glassware shattering against the wall.

“Ay!” a man yelled. He was huge, wearing a white smock and a white chef’s hat like a cloud. There was a red bandanna around his neck, and in one hand he held a ladle that was dripping some sort of brown sauce. “Ay, you can’t come in here like-a dat!”

“We have to get out,” I said. “He’s crazy. He’s—”

An idea struck me then, a way of explaining without explaining, and I put my hand over Diane’s left breast for a moment, on the soaked cloth of her dress. It was the last time I ever touched her intimately, and I don’t know if it felt good or not. I held my hand out to the chef, showing him a palm streaked with Humboldt’s blood.

“Good Christ,” he said. “Here. Inna da back.”

At that instant, the door we’d come through burst open again and the maitre d’ rolled in, eyes wild, hair sticking out everywhere like fur on a hedgehog that’s tucked itself into a ball. He looked around, saw the waiter, dismissed him, saw me, and rushed at me.

I bolted again, dragging Diane with me, shoving blindly at the softbellied bulk of the chef. We went past him, the front of Diane’s dress leaving a smear of blood on the front of his tunic. I saw he wasn’t coming with us, that he was turning toward the maitre d’ instead, and wanted to warn him, wanted to tell him that wouldn’t work, that it was the worst idea in the world and likely to be the last idea he ever had, but there was no time.

“Ay!” the chef cried. “Ay, Guy, what’s dis?” He said the maitre d’s name as the French do, so it rhymes with free, and then he didn’t say anything at all. There was a heavy thud that made me think of the sound of the knife burying itself in Humboldt’s skull, and then the

cook screamed. It had a watery sound. It was followed by a thick wet splat that haunts my dreams. I don't know what it was, and I don't want to know.

I yanked Diane down a narrow aisle between two stoves that baked a furious dull heat out at us. There was a door at the end, locked shut by two heavy steel bolts. I reached for the top one and then heard Guy, The Maitre d' from Hell, coming after us, babbling.

I wanted to keep at the bolt, wanted to believe I could open the door and get us outside before he could get within sticking distance, but part of me—the part that was determined to live—knew better. I pushed Diane against the door, stepped in front of her in a protective maneuver that must go all the way back to the Ice Age, and faced him.

He came running up the narrow aisle between the stoves with the knife gripped in his left hand and raised above his head. His mouth was open and pulled back from a set of dingy, eroded teeth. Any hope of help I might have had from Gimpel the Fool disappeared. He was cowering against the wall beside the door to the restaurant. His fingers were buried deep inside his mouth, making him look more like the village idiot than ever.

“Forgetful of me you shouldn't have been!” Guy screamed, sounding like Yoda in the Star Wars movies. “Your hateful dog! ... Your loud music, so disharmonious! ... Eeeee! ... How you ever—”

There was a large pot on one of the front burners of the lefthand stove. I reached out for it and slapped it at him. It was over an hour before I realized how badly I'd burned my hand doing that; I had a palmful of blisters like little buns, and more blisters on my three middle fingers. The pot skidded off its burner and tipped over in midair, dousing Guy from the waist down with what looked like corn, rice, and maybe two gallons of boiling water.

He screamed, staggered backward, and put the hand that wasn't holding the knife down on the other stove, almost directly into the

blue-yellow gasflame underneath a skillet where mushrooms which had been sauteing were now turning to charcoal. He screamed again, this time in a register so high it hurt my ears, and held his hand up before his eyes, as if not able to believe it was connected to him.

I looked to my right and saw a little nestle of cleaning equipment beside the door—Glass-X and Clorox and Janitor In A Drum on a shelf, a broom with a dustpan stuck on top of the handle like a hat, and a mop in a steel bucket with a squeegee on the side.

As Guy came toward me again, holding the knife in the hand that wasn't red and swelling up like an innertube, I grabbed the handle of the mop, used it to roll the bucket in front of me on its little casters, and then jabbed it out at him. Guy pulled back with his upper body but stood his ground. There was a peculiar, twitching little smile on his lips. He looked like a dog who has forgotten, temporarily, at least, how to snarl. He held the knife up in front of his face and made several mystic passes with it. The overhead fluorescents glimmered liquidly on the blade ... where it wasn't caked with blood, that was. He didn't seem to feel any pain in his burned hand, or in his legs, although they had been doused with boiling water and his tuxedo pants were spackled with rice.

"Rotten bugger," Guy said, making his mystic passes. He was like a Crusader preparing to go into battle. If, that was, you could imagine a Crusader in a rice-caked tux. "Kill you like I did your nasty barking dog."

"I don't have a dog," I said. "I can't have a dog. It's in the lease."

I think it was the only thing I said to him during the whole nightmare, and I'm not entirely sure I did say it out loud. It might only have been a thought. Behind him, I could see the chef struggling to his feet. He had one hand wrapped around the handle of the kitchen's big refrigerator and the other clapped to his bloodstained tunic, which was torn open across the swelling of his stomach in a big purple grin. He was doing his best to hold his plumbing in, but it was a battle he

was losing. One loop of intestines, shiny and bruise-colored, already hung out, resting against his left side like some awful watch-chain.

Guy fainted at me with his knife. I countered by shoving the mop-bucket at him, and he drew back. I pulled it to me again and stood there with my hands wrapped around the wooden mop-handle, ready to shove the bucket at him if he moved. My own hand was throbbing and I could feel sweat trickling down my cheeks like hot oil. Behind Guy, the cook had managed to get all the way up. Slowly, like an invalid in early recovery from a serious operation, he started working his way down the aisle toward Gimpel the Fool. I wished him well.

“Undo those bolts,” I said to Diane.

“What?”

“The bolts on the door. Undo them.”

“I can’t move,” she said. She was crying so hard I could barely understand her. “You’re crushing me.”

I moved forward a little to give her room. Guy bared his teeth at me. Mock-jabbed with the knife, then pulled it back, grinning his nervous, snarly little grin as I rolled the bucket at him again on its squeaky casters.

“Bug-infested stinkpot,” he said. He sounded like a man discussing the Mets’ chances in the forthcoming campaign. “Let’s see you play your radio this loud now, stinkpot. It gives you a change in your thinking, doesn’t it? Boink!”

He jabbed. I rolled. But this time he didn’t pull back as far, and I realized he was nerving himself up. He meant to go for it, and soon. I could feel Diane’s breasts brush against my back as she gasped for breath. I’d given her room, but she hadn’t turned around to work the bolts. She was just standing there.

“Open the door,” I told her, speaking out of the side of my mouth like a prison con. “Pull the goddam bolts, Diane.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed. “I can’t, I don’t have any strength in my hands. Make him stop, Steven, don’t stand there talking with him, make him stop.”

She was driving me insane. I really thought she was. “You turn around and pull those bolts, Diane, or I’ll just stand aside and let—”

“EEEEEEEEEE!” he screamed, and charged, waving and stabbing with the knife.

I slammed the mop-bucket forward with all the force I could muster, and swept his legs out from under him. He howled and brought the knife down in a long, desperate stroke. Any closer and it would have torn off the tip of my nose. Then he landed spraddled awkwardly on wide-spread knees, with his face just above the mop-squeezing gadget hung on the side of the bucket. Perfect! I drove the mophead into the nape of his neck. The strings dragged down over the shoulders of his black jacket like a witch-wig. His face slammed into the squeegee. I bent, grabbed the handle with my free hand, and clamped it shut. Guy shrieked with pain, the sound muffled by the mop.

“PULL THOSE BOLTS!” I screamed at Diane. “PULL THOSE BOLTS, YOU USELESS BITCH! PULL—”

Thud! Something hard and pointed slammed into my left buttock. I staggered forward with a yell—more surprise than pain, I think, although it did hurt. I went to one knee and lost my hold on the squeegee handle. Guy pulled back, slipping out from under the stringy head of the mop at the same time, breathing so loudly he sounded almost as if he were barking. It hadn’t slowed him down much, though; he lashed out at me with the knife as soon as he was clear of the bucket. I pulled back, feeling the breeze as the blade cut the air beside my cheek.

It was only as I scrambled up that I realized what had happened, what she had done. I snatched a quick glance over my shoulder at her. She stared back defiantly, her back pressed against the door. A crazy thought came to me: she wanted me to get killed. Had perhaps even planned it, the whole thing. Found herself a crazy maitre d' and —

Her eyes widened. “Look out!”

I turned back just in time to see him lunging at me. The sides of his face were bright red, except for the big white spots made by the drain-holes in the squeegee. I rammed the mophead at him, aiming for the throat and getting his chest instead. I stopped his charge and actually knocked him backward a step. What happened then was only luck. He slipped in water from the overturned bucket and went down hard, slamming his head on the tiles. Not thinking and just vaguely aware that I was screaming, I snatched up the skillet of mushrooms from the stove and brought it down on his upturned face as hard as I could. There was a muffled thump, followed by a horrible (but mercifully brief) hissing sound as the skin of his cheeks and forehead boiled.

I turned, shoved Diane aside, and drew the bolts holding the door shut. I opened the door and sunlight hit me like a hammer. And the smell of the air. I can't remember air ever smelling better, not even when I was a kid, and it was the first day of summer vacation.

I grabbed Diane's arm and pulled her out into a narrow alley lined with padlocked trash-bins. At the far end of this narrow stone slit, like a vision of heaven, was Fifty-third Street with traffic going heedlessly back and forth. I looked over my shoulder and through the open kitchen door. Guy lay on his back with carbonized mushrooms circling his head like an existential diadem. The skillet had slid off to one side, revealing a face that was red and swelling with blisters. One of his eyes was open, but it looked unseeingly up at the fluorescent lights. Behind him, the kitchen was empty. There was a pool of blood on the floor and bloody handprints on the white enamel

front of the walk-in fridge, but both the chef and Gimpel the Fool were gone.

I slammed the door shut and pointed down the alley. “Go on.”

She didn’t move, only looked at me.

I shoved her lightly on her left shoulder. “Go!”

She raised a hand like a traffic-cop, shook her head, then pointed a finger at me. “Don’t you touch me.”

“What’ll you do? Sic your lawyer on me? I think he’s dead, sweetheart.”

“Don’t you patronize me like that. Don’t you dare. And don’t touch me, Steven, I’m warning you.”

The kitchen door burst open. Moving, not thinking but just moving, I slammed it shut again. I heard a muffled cry—whether anger or pain I didn’t know and didn’t care—just before it clicked shut. I leaned my back against it and braced my feet. “Do you want to stand here and discuss it?” I asked her. “He’s still pretty lively, by the sound.” He hit the door again. I rocked with it, then slammed it shut. I waited for him to try again, but he didn’t.

Diane gave me a long look, glarey and uncertain, and then started walking up the alleyway with her head down and her hair hanging at the sides of her neck. I stood with my back against the door until she got about three quarters of the way to the street, then stood away from it, watching it warily. No one came out, but I decided that wasn’t going to guarantee any peace of mind. I dragged one of the trash-bins in front of the door, then set off after Diane, jogging.

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When I got to the mouth of the alley, she wasn’t there anymore. I looked right, toward Madison, and didn’t see her. I looked left and

there she was, wandering slowly across Fifty-third on a diagonal, her head still down and her hair still hanging like curtains at the sides of her face. No one paid any attention to her; the people in front of the Gotham Cafe were gawking through the plate-glass windows like people in front of the New England Aquarium shark-tank at feeding time. Sirens were approaching, a lot of them.

I went across the street, reached for her shoulder, thought better of it. I settled for calling her name, instead.

She turned around, her eyes dulled with horror and shock. The front of her dress had turned into a grisly purple bib. She stank of blood and spent adrenaline.

“Leave me alone,” she said. “I never want to see you again, Steven.”

“You kicked my ass in there,” I said. “You kicked my ass and almost got me killed. Both of us. I can’t believe you, Diane.”

“I’ve wanted to kick your ass for the last fourteen months,” she said. “When it comes to fulfilling our dreams, we can’t always pick our times, can w—”

I slapped her across the face. I didn’t think about it, I just did it, and few things in my adult life have given me so much pleasure. I’m ashamed of that, but I’ve come too far in this story to tell a lie, even one of omission.

Her head rocked back. Her eyes widened in shock and pain, losing that dull, traumatized look.

“You bastard!” she cried, her hand going to her cheek. Now tears were brimming in her eyes. “Oh, you bastard!”

“I saved your life,” I said. “Don’t you realize that? Doesn’t that get through? I saved your fucking life.”

“You son of a bitch,” she whispered. “You controlling, judgemental, small-minded, conceited, complacent son of a bitch. I hate you.”

“Did you even hear me? If it wasn’t for the conceited, small-minded son of a bitch, you’d be dead now.”

“If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have been there in the first place,” she said as the first three police cars came screaming down Fifty-third Street and pulled up in front of the Gotham Cafe. Cops poured out of them like clowns in a circus act. “If you ever touch me again, I’ll scratch your eyes out, Steve,” she said. “Stay away from me.”

I had to put my hands in my armpits. They wanted to kill her, to reach out and wrap themselves around her neck and just kill her.

She walked seven or eight steps, then turned back to me. She was smiling. It was a terrible smile, more awful than any expression I had seen on the face of Guy the Demon Waiter. “I had lovers,” she said, smiling her terrible smile. She was lying. The lie was all over her face, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. She wished it was true; that was all over her face, too. “Three of them over the last year or so. You weren’t any good at it, so I found men who were.”

She turned and walked down the street, like a woman who was sixty-five instead of twenty-seven. I stood and watched her. Just before she reached the corner I shouted it again. It was the one thing I couldn’t get past; it was stuck in my throat like a chicken bone. “I saved your life! Your goddam life!”

She paused at the corner and turned back to me. The terrible smile was still on her face. “No,” she said. “You didn’t.”

Then she went on around the corner. I haven’t seen her since, although I suppose I will. I’ll see her in court, as the saying goes.

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I found a market on the next block and bought a package of Marlboros. When I got back to the corner of Madison and Fifty-third, Fifty-third had been blocked off with those blue sawhorses the cops use to protect crime-scenes and parade routes. I could see the restaurant, though. I could see it just fine. I sat down on the curb, lit a cigarette, and observed developments. Half a dozen rescue vehicles arrived—a scream of ambulances, I guess you could say. The chef went into the first one, unconscious but apparently still alive. His brief appearance before his fans on Fifty-third Street was followed by a body-bag on a stretcher—Humboldt. Next came Guy, strapped tightly to a stretcher and staring wildly around as he was loaded into the back of an ambulance. I thought that for just a moment his eyes met mine, but that was probably my imagination.

As Guy's ambulance pulled away, rolling through a hole in the sawhorse barricade provided by two uniformed cops, I tossed the cigarette I'd been smoking in the gutter. I hadn't gone through this day just to start killing myself with tobacco again, I decided.

I looked after the departing ambulance and tried to imagine the man inside it living wherever maitre d's live—Queens or Brooklyn or maybe even Rye or Mamaroneck. I tried to imagine what his own dining room might look like, what pictures might be on the walls. I couldn't do that, but I found I could imagine his bedroom with relative ease, although not whether he shared it with a woman. I could see him lying awake but perfectly still, looking up at the ceiling in the small hours while the moon hung in the black firmament like the half-lidded eye of a corpse; I could imagine him lying there and listening to the neighbor's dog bark steadily and monotonously, going on and on until the sound was like a silver nail driving into his brain. I imagined him lying not far from a closet filled with tuxedos in plastic dry-cleaning bags. I could see them hanging there like executed felons. I wondered if he did have a wife. If so, had he killed her before coming to work? I thought of the blob on his shirt and decided it was a possibility. I also wondered about the neighbor's dog, the one that wouldn't shut up. And the neighbor's family.

But mostly it was Guy I thought about, lying sleepless through all the same nights I had lain sleepless, listening to the dog next door or down the street as I had listened to sirens and the rumble of trucks heading downtown. I thought of him lying there and looking up at the shadows the moon had tacked to the ceiling. Thought of that cry—Eeeeeeee!—building up in his head like gas in a closed room.

“Eeeee,” I said ... just to see how it sounded. I dropped the package of Marlboros into the gutter and began stamping it methodically as I sat there on the curb. “Eeeee. Eeeee. Eeeeeee.”

One of the cops standing by the sawhorses looked over at me. “Hey, buddy, want to stop being a pain in the butt?” he called over. “We got us a situation here.”

Of course you do, I thought. Don’t we all.

I didn’t say anything, though. I stopped stamping—the cigarette pack was pretty well dead by then, anyway—and stopped making the noise. I could still hear it in my head, though, and why not? It makes as much sense as anything else.

Eeeeeeee.

Eeeeeeee.

Eeeeeeee.