

The background features a globe with a rainbow gradient from blue at the top to red at the bottom. A stack of books is positioned in the upper left, and three interlocking gears (green, blue, and red) are on the right. The text 'OVERDRIVE' is in the upper left, and 'ReaderWorks' is the main title in the center.

OVERDRIVE®

ReaderWorks

Lunch at the Gotham Cafe

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 needed some time alone, and that I would hear from her therapist. I sat on the chair at the kitchen end of the table, reading this communication over and over again, not able to believe it. The only clear thought I remember having in the next half hour or so was I didn't even know you had a therapist, Diane.

After a while I got up, went into the bedroom, and looked around. All her clothes were gone (except for a joke

sweatshirt someone had given her, with the words RICH BLOND printed on the front in spangly stuff), and the room had a funny dislocated look, as if she had gone through it, looking for something. I checked my stuff to see if she'd taken anything. My hands felt cold and distant while I did this, as if they had been shot full of some numbing drug. As far as I could tell, everything that was supposed to be there was there. I hadn't expected anything different, and yet the room had that funny look, as if she had pulled at it, the way she sometimes pulled on the ends of her hair when she felt exasperated.

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 she'd left behind over again. It was the same but looking into the strangely ruffled bedroom and the half-empty 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.

Therapist. My eye kept going back to that word. Therapist. I supposed I should have been glad it wasn't lawyer, but I wasn't. You will hear from William Humboldt my therapist.

‘Heat from this, sweetiepie,’ I told the empty room, and squeezed my crotch. It didn’t sound rough and funny, as I’d hoped, and the face I saw in the mirror across the room was as pale as paper.

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 hadn’t seen it

coming. I didn't have a clue. What therapist? When did she see him? What did she talk about? Well, I supposed I knew what she talked about - me. Probably stuff about how I never remembered to put the ring down again after I finished taking a leak, how I wanted oral sex a tiresome amount of the time (how much was tiresome? I didn't know), how I didn't take enough interest in her job at the publishing company. Another question: how could she talk about the most intimate aspects of her marriage to a man named 'William Humboldt? He sounded like he should be a physicist at CalTech, or maybe a back-bencher in the House of Lords.

Then there was the Super Bonus

Question: Why hadn't I known something was up? How could I have walked into it like Sonny Liston into Cassius Clay's famous phantom uppercut? Was it stupidity? Insensitivity? As the days passed and I thought about the last six or eight months of our two-year marriage, I decided it 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.

Two days later I got a call at work from the famous William Humboldt. After ascertaining that he was indeed speaking to Steven Davis, he promptly

began calling me Steve. You may find that a trifle hard to believe, but it is nevertheless exactly what happened. Humboldt's voice was soft, small, and intimate. It made me think of a car purring on a silk pillow.

When I asked after Diane, Humboldt told me that she was doing as well as expected,' and when I asked if I could talk to her, he said he believed that would be 'counterproductive to her case at: this time.' Then, even more unbelievably (to my mind, at least) he asked in a grotesquely solicitous voice how I was doing.

'I'm in the pink,' I said. 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. 'Mr Humboldt ... it is mister, I take it, and -not doctor?'

'I use mister, although I have degrees-'

'Mr Humboldt, if Diane doesn't want to come home and doesn't want to talk to me, what does she want? Why did you call me?'

'Diane would like access to the safe deposit box,' he said in his mooch, purry little voice. 'Your joint safe deposit box.'

I suddenly understood the punched,

rumpled look of the bedroom and felt the first bright stirrings of anger. She had been looking for the key to the box, of course. She hadn't been interested in my little collection of pre-World War II silver dollars or the onyx pinkie ring she'd bought me for our first anniversary (we'd only had two in all) . . . but in the safe deposit box was the diamond necklace I'd given her, and about thirty thousand dollars' worth of negotiable securities. The key was at our little summer cabin in the Adirondacks, I realized. Not on purpose, but out of simple forgetfulness. I'd left it on top of the bureau, pushed way back amid the dust and the mouse turds.

Pain in my left hand. I looked down

and my hand rolled into a right fist, and rolled it open. The nails had cut crescents in the pad of the palm.

‘Steve?’ Humboldt was purring.

‘Steve, are you there?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ve got two things for you. Are you ready?’

‘Of course,’ he said in that parry little voice, and for a moment I had a bizarre vision: William Humboldt blasting through the desert on a Harley-Davidson, surrounded by a pack of Hell’s Angels. On the back of his leather jacket: BORN TO COMFORT.

Pain in my left hand again. It had closed up again on its own, just like a clam. This time when I unrolled it, two

of the four little crescents were oozing blood.

‘First,’ I said, ‘that box is going to stay closed unless some divorce court judge orders it opened in the presence of Diane’s attorney and mine. In the meantime, no one is going to loot it, and that’s a promise. Not me, not her.’ I paused. ‘Not you, either.’

‘I think that your hostile attitude is counterproductive,’ he said. ‘And if you examine your last few statements, Steve, you may begin to understand why your wife is so emotionally shattered, so—’

‘Second,’ I overrode him (it’s something we hostile people are good at), ‘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 you'll find out just how hostile my attitude can be.'

'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.

That afternoon I talked to a friend in the legal department, and he recommended a friend of his who did divorce work. I didn't want a divorce - I was furious at her, but had not the slightest question that I still loved her and wanted her back - but I didn't like

Humboldt. I didn't like the idea of Humboldt. He made me nervous, him and his purry little voice. I think I would have preferred some hardball shyster who would have called up and said, You give us a copy of that lockbox key before the close of business today, Davis, and maybe my client will relent and decide to leave you with some-thing besides two pairs of underwear and your blood donor's card- got it?

That I could have understood.

Humboldt, on the other hand, felt sneaky.

The divorce lawyer was John Ring, and he listened patiently to my tale of woe. I suspect he'd heard most of it before.

'If I was entirely sure she wanted a

divorce, I think I'd be easier in my mind,' I finished.

'Be entirely sure,' Ring said at once. 'Humboldt's a stalking horse, Mr Davis . . . and a potentially damaging witness if this drifts into court. I have no doubt that your wife went to a lawyer first, and when the lawyer found out about the missing lockbox key, he suggested Humboldt. A lawyer couldn't go right to you; that would be unethical. Come across with that key, my friend, and Humboldt will disappear from the picture. Count on it.'

Most of this went right past me. I was concentrating on what he'd said first.

'You think she wants a divorce,' I

said.

‘Oh, yes,’ he replied. ‘She wants a divorce. Indeed she does. And she doesn’t intend to walk away from the marriage empty-handed.’

I made an appointment with Ring to sit down and discuss things further the following day. I went home from the office as late as I could, walked back and forth through the apartment for a while, 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, or 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 crossed my mind 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.

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!, 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 had 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 had 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, if you see what I mean. Very likely you don't, but I can't think of any other way to put it.

Have I speculated that quitting when I did may have played a part in what happened at the Gotham Cafe that day? Of course I have. . . but I haven't lost any sleep over it. None of us can predict the final outcomes of our actions, after all, and few even try; most of us just do what we do to prolong a moment's pleasure or to stop the pain for a while.

And even when we act for the noblest reasons, the last link of the chain all too often drips with someone's blood.

Humboldt called me again two weeks after the evening when I'd bombed West 83rd Street with my cigarettes, and this time he stuck with Mr Davis as a form of address. He asked me how I was doing, and I told him I was doing fine. With that amenity out of the way, he told me that he had called on Diane's behalf. Diane, he said, wanted to sit down with me and discuss 'certain aspects' of the marriage- I suspected that 'certain aspects' meant the key to the safe deposit box - not to mention various other financial issues Diane might want

to investigate before hauling her lawyer onstage - but what my head knew and what my body was doing were completely different things. I could feel my skin flush and my heart speed up; I could feel a pulse tapping away in the wrist of the hand holding the phone. You have to remember that 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.

Still I retained enough sense to ask him just what aspects we were talking about here.

Humboldt chuckled fatly in my ear and said he would rather save that for our actual meeting.

‘Are you sure this is a good idea?’ I asked. As a question, it was nothing but a time-buyer- I knew it wasn’t a good idea. I also knew I was going to do it. I wanted to see her again. Felt I had to see her again.

‘Oh, yes, I think so.’ At once, no hesitation. Any question that Humboldt and Diane had worked this out very carefully between them (and yes, very likely with a lawyer’s advice) evaporated. ‘It’s always best to let some time pass before bringing the principals together, a little cooling-off period, but in my judgment 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 . . . my own therapist?’

The fat chuckle came again, shivering in my ear like something just turned out of a Jell-O mold. ‘Do you have one, Mr Davis?’

‘No, actually, I don’t. 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 rip of a toothpick under my thumb-nail 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 cigaretteless on the waves of the world. ‘Pardon me?’

‘I asked if you know the Gotham Card on 53rd Street,’ he said, sounding a touch impatient now. ‘Between Madison and Park.’

‘No, but I’m sure I can find it.’

‘Noon?’

I thought of telling him to tell Diane to wear the green dress with the little black speckles and the deep slit up the side, then decided that would probably be counterproductive- ‘Noon will be fine,’ I said.

We said the things that you say when you’re ending a conversation with someone you already don’t like but have to deal with.

When it was over, I 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.

It wasn’t fine with John Ring, none of

it.

‘He’s setting you up,’ he said. ‘They both are. Under this arrangement, Diane’s lawyer is there by remote control and I’m not in the picture at all. It stinks.’

Maybe, but you never had her stick her tongue in your mouth when she feels you start to come, I thought. But since that wasn’t the sort of thing you could say to a lawyer you’d just hired, I only told him I wanted to see her again, see if there was a chance to salvage things.

He sighed.

‘Don’t be a putz. You see him at this restaurant, you see her, you break bread, you drink a little wine, she crosses her legs, you look, you talk nice, she crosses

her legs again, you look some more, maybe they talk you into a duplicate of the safe deposit key—‘

‘They won’t.’

‘—and the next time you see them, you’ll see them in court, and everything damaging you said while you were looking at her legs and thinking about how it was to have them wrapped around you will turn up on the record. And you’re apt to say a lot of damaging stuff, because they’ll come primed with all the right questions. I understand that you want to see her, I’m not insensitive to these things, but this is not the way. You’re nor Donald Trump and she’s nor Ivana, burt this isn’t a no-faulter we got

here, either, buddy, and Humboldt knows it. Diane does, too.'

'Nobody's been served with papers, and if she just wants to talk—'

'Don't be dense,' he said. 'Once you get to this stage of the party, no one wants to just talk - They either want to fuck or go home. The divorce has already happened, Steven. This meeting is a fishing expedition, pure and simple. You have nothing to gain and everything to lose. It's stupid.'

'Just the same—'

'You've done very well for yourself, especially in the last five years—'

'I know, but—'

'—and, for thuhree 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 see knew damned well it was my favorite.

He sighed again. ‘I can’t have this discussion, or I’m going to end up drinking my lunch instead of eating it.’

‘Go and eat your lunch. Diet plate. Cottage cheese.’

‘Okay, but first I’m going to make one more effort to get through to you. A meeting like this is like a joust. They’ll show . up in full armor. You’re going to be there dressed in nothing but 1 smile, without even a jock to hold up your balls. And that’s exactly the region of your anatomy they’re apt to go for first.’

‘I want to see her,’ I said. ‘I want to see how she is. I’m sorry.’

He uttered a small, cynical laugh. I’m not going to talk you our 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 am.'

'Good. Don't yell at her, Steven. They may set it up so you really feel like doing that, but don't. Okay?'

'Okay.' 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. He’s a . . . a therapist. 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. If she tells him you flipped her over and raped her with a corncob, he doesn’t say prove it, he says oh you poor thing and how many times. 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 wants to eat his lunch and forget the whole thing.

‘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. Stick with all the touchy-feely stuff. If they get pissed off and ask why you kept the lunch date if you weren’t going to discuss nuts and bolts, tell them 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 strongly sensed that Ring wanted to be done with this conversation.

‘As a lawyer - your lawyer - I’m telling you that this is a bull-shit 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 that diet plate for me.'

'Fuck the diet plate,' Ring sold morosely. 'If I can't have a double bourbon on the rocks an lunch anymore, I can at least have a double cheeseburger at Brew 'n Burger.'

'Rare,' I said.

'That's right, rare.'

'Spoken like a true American-'

'I hope she stands you up, Steven-'

'I know you do.'

He hung up and went out to get his

alcohol substitute. 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 Humboldt had been a lawyer instead of a therapist, he, John Ring, would have been in on our luncheon meeting. And in that case he might have wound up as dead as William Humboldt.

I walked from my office to the Gotham Cafe leaving at 11:15 and arriving across from the restaurant at 11:45. 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 ordinary, just one of the eight hundred or so pricey restaurants crammed together in Midtown.

With the meeting place located and my mind temporarily set to 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, even pitiable. 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 12:05. 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 been just Diane, I would have gone in at 12:45, 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 have been 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.

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 flatness, 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 you 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 simply to 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 would have been 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 hack 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 haft-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 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, which I had forgotten to check. Perhaps

on the Island of the maitre d's, dog was a slang for umbrella, especially when carried by a patron on a day when rain did not look 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 inquiry - 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.

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, deep or otherwise) 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 at me. And although she hadn't said a single word, I was already furious at her. The expression in her eyes was a dead negative; she might as well have been a CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE sign on her forehead between them. I thought I deserved better. Of course, that may just be a way of saying I'm human.

'Monsieur,' the maitre d' said, pulling out the chair to Diane's left. I barely heard him, and certainly any thought of

his eccentric behaviours and crooked bow tie had left my head. I think that 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 at 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.

‘We’ll get you a drink,’ Humboldt

said, looking around for waiter like a man who did it a lot. Her therapist had all the bells and whistles of the incipient alcoholic. Wonderful.

‘Perrier and lime is good.’

‘For what?’ Humboldt inquired with a big smile. 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. ‘WEB, perhaps we’d better get started.’

I paid no attention. I already had gotten started; I’d done it the instant Diane looked up at me. ‘Hi, Diane,’ I said. It was marvelous, really, how she looked smarter and prettier than

previous. More desirable than previous, too. 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.

‘Steve -Mr Davis,’ Humboldt said, ‘I thought we might begin by getting you to look at a list of grievances which Diane has worked out during our sessions - our

exhaustive sessions, I might say - over the last couple of weeks. Certainly it can serve as a springboard to our main purpose for being here, which is how to order a period of separation that will allow growth on both of your parts.’

There was a briefcase on the floor beside him. He picked it up with a grunt and set it on the table’s one empty chair. Humboldt began unsnapping the clasps, but I quit paying attention at that point. I wasn’t interested in springboards to separation, whatever that meant. I felt a combination of panic and anger that was, in some ways, the most peculiar emotion I have ever experienced.

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. Horror was followed by anger.

‘Isn't that just like you!’ she exclaimed.

‘Diane—‘

‘Where's the safe deposit box key, Steven? Where did you hide it?’

Humboldt looked alarmed. He reached out and touched her arm. ‘Diane .. I thought we agreed—‘

‘What we agreed is that this son of a bitch will hide everything under the nearest rock and then plead poverty if we let him!’

‘You searched the bedroom for it before you left, didn’t you’ I asked quietly. ‘Tossed it like a burglar.’

She flushed at that. I don’t know if it was shame, anger, or both.

‘It’s my box as well as yours! My things as well as yours!’

Humboldt was looking more alarmed than ever. Several diners had glanced around at us. Most of them looked mused, actually. People are surely God’s most bizarre creatures. ‘Please... please, let’s not—’

‘Where did you hide it, Steven?’

‘I didn’t hide it. I never hid it. I left it up at the cabin by accident, that’s all.’

She smiled knowingly. ‘Oh, yes. By

accident. Uh-huh.' I said nothing, and the knowing smile slipped away. 'I want it,' she said, then amended hastily: 'I want a copy.'

People in hell want icewater, I thought. Out loud I said, 'There's nothing more to be done about it, is there?'

She hesitated, maybe hearing something in my voice she didn't actually want to hear, or to acknowledge. 'No,' she said. 'The next time you see me, it will be with my lawyer. I'm divorcing you.'

'Why?' What I heard in my voice now was a plaintive note like a sheep's bleat. I didn't like it, but there wasn't a goddamned thing I could do about it. 'Why?'

‘Oh, I Jesus. Do you expect me to believe you’re really that dense?’

‘I just can’t—’

Her cheeks were brighter than ever, the flush now rising almost her temples. ‘Yes, probably you expect me to believe just that very thing. 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 stop a scuffle before it gets started, but he seemed to have forgotten all about Diane’s shit-list; his eyes were sweeping the rear part of the room, looking out for our waiter, or any waiter whose eye he could catch. He was lot less interested in therapy, at that particular moment, than he was in obtaining what the British like to call the other half.

‘I only want to know—’ I began.

‘What you want to know doesn’t have anything to do with why Humboldt said, and for a moment he actually sounded

alert.

‘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. ‘If you wanted to try joint counselling instead of... uh... therapy... whatever it is Humboldt does... I’m not against it if—’

She raised her hands to shoulder level, palms out. ‘Oh, God, Joe Camel goes 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 clients 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 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 tossed the joint and then walked out when you couldn't find what you wanted, 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: the grievances. Diane's shit-list, in other words. And a lot more about the key to the lockbox. Probably the only satisfaction I was going to get out of this sorry situation was telling them that neither of them was going to see a copy of that key until an officer of the court presented me with a paper ordering me to turn one over. I hadn't touched the stuff in the box since Diane booked on out of my life, and I didn't intend to touch any of it in the immediate future.. but she wasn't going to touch it, either. Let her chew crackers and try to

whistle, as my grandmother used to say.

Humboldt took out a sheaf of papers. They were held by one of those designer paper clips - the ones that come in different colors. It occurred to me that I had arrived abysmally unprepared for this meeting, and not just because my lawyer was jaw-deep in a cheeseburger somewhere, either. Diane had her new dress; Humboldt had his designer briefcase, plus Diane's shit-list held together by a color-coded designer paper clip; all I had was a new umbrella on a sunny day. I looked down at where it lay beside my chair 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.

' The major problems your wife has articulated - so far, at least - are insensitivity on your part regarding her job, and an inability to trust in personal affairs,' Humboldt said. 'In regard to the second, I'd say your unwillingness to give Diane fair access to the safe deposit box you maintain in common

pretty well sums up the trust issue.'

I opened my mouth to tell him I had a trust issue, too, that I didn't trust Diane not to take the whole works and then sit on it. Before I could say anything, however, 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... Eeeeeeee! . . . I told you time and again about that dog . . . Eeeeeeee!... All that time I can't sleep.. . Eeeeeeee!.. . She says cut youf fave, that cunt... Eeeeeeee! . . . How you tease me!... Eeeeeeee! . . . And now you bring

that dog in here... Eeeeeee!"

The room fell silent at once, of course, diners looking up 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. No amusement on the surrounding faces now; only astonishment. The maitre d's bow tie had turned 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 bar 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 masteter 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! EEEEEEEEEEE!' the maitre d' screamed, and swung the butcher knife fiat 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

water glass 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 therapist, 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. . . Eeeeeee! . . . DOG LOVER!'

Now other people were screaming,

mostly at the sight of the blood, I think. 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 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 Schutz'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 got cancer, 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 top 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 words 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 head wound 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

blood-spattered hands to her face, over her eyes. The maitre d' paid no attention to her. Instead, he turned to me.

'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 that 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 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 plowed 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. Didn't like it? It terrified me. Not that I wasn't terrified already.

I grabbed Dianne'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.

'Eeee! 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. Later than night, the

little questions haunted 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 open 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!... Eeee!... 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 all!'

I saw three doors, two 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 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 ladle that was dripping some sort of brown sauce. 'Ay, you can't come in here likea dat!'

'We have got to get out' I said. 'He's crazy. He's -'

An idea struck me then, a way of 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, ever wild, hair sticking 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 soft-bellied bulk of the Chef. We went passed 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 afer us, babbling.

I wanted to keep at the bolt, wanted to believe I could open the door and get us out 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, and he looked more like the village idiot than ever.

'Forgetful of me you shouldn't have been!' Guy screamed, sounding like Yoda in the Star War movies. 'Your hateful dog!... Your loud music, so disharmonious! ... Eeee!... How you ever-'

There was a large pot on one of the front burners of the left-hand 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 gas flame underneath a skillet where mushrooms

which had been sauteeing 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 inner tube, 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 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 feinted 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 canisters.

'Bug-infested stinkpot,' he said. He sounded like a man discussing the Mets' chances in the forthcoming season. '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 the side of my mouth like a prison con. 'Pull the goddamn 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 mop head 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 mop head 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 5 3rd 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 therapist 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.

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 53rd 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 Boston Seaquarium 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.'

'You kicked my ass in there, you bitch,' I said. 'You kicked my ass and almost got me killed. Both of us. I can't believe you.'

'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 hauled off and 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, judgmental, small-minded, conceited, complacent son of a bitch. I hate you.'

'Fuck that jerk-off crap. If it wasn't for the conceited, smallminded 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 53rd Street and pulled up in front of the Gotham Cafe. Cops poured out of them like downs 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 the lie 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 up 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.goddamn 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.

I found a market on the next block and bought a package of Marlboros. When I got back to the corner of Madison and 53rd, 53rd 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 53rd 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 just 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 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 in the dark 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 - Eeeeeee!- 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 flattened 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.