

RICHARD BOWES

A HUNTSMAN PASSING BY

1.

GOOD EVENING! HERE I AM back working the door at an exclusive event. Like old times. It's been a while since we met. I'm not sure anyone else can see you in your coat of moonlight. Or what any of them would understand if they did.

The secret behind my being able to recognize you is dyslexia. It's how I found my identity and my job, how I got married and had kids. If I'd been able to read, God knows where I'd be now.

My not being able to write things down is why my memory got good. It's why, even though I haven't done doors for a few years, I can still remember every face and name on the Lower Manhattan Art circuit.

Tonight they're celebrating the memory of the late Seventies. And back then no Downtown event was complete without me. So when they organized the party for the release of Victor Sparger's Raphael! I was asked to provide security for old time's sake.

The idea of this event bothered me and I wasn't going to do it. Then something I read to my kids recently made me change my mind. That and something my wife told me. My wife, when we were wondering if you'd be here, told me to say hello.

Raphael! is one painter directing a film about another. People say that's kind of a culmination of that whole scene. The movie's set downtown twenty years ago when the art world was the buzz in New York's ear. Big money changed hands. Large reputations got made. Victor Sparger was in right from the start. Painter and sculptor, very smart and pretty talented, he knew all the right names: Picasso and Braque, Warhol and Geldhazer. He was and is a prudent man. He invested his earnings, cultivated his image, bought real estate. Then out of nowhere came Louis Raphael. And in magazine articles about the scene Victor Sparger suddenly looked like a footnote.

In this film, Sparger gives the world a movie about Louis Raphael. He intends that people interested in Raphael will find out about him through Sparger. It's not exactly crooked or illegal. But it's unjust in some way that's beyond the reach of human law.

That kind of thing only gets resolved in fairy tales. Which I take it is why you are here before me in that blue and silver dress on this Bowery sidewalk. And why I bow you into Ling's Fortune Cookie. You're on everybody's guest list whether they know it or not.

The Fortune Cookie is new since the last time you were around. Back then the

site was still an upscale gay baths. Now it's a Chinese restaurant with waitresses who happen to be Asian guys. Drag is the gimmick of the moment.

From inside the door we get to see the aging, slightly raddled survivors of the Mudd Club plus their younger tricks and camp followers. The walls are hung with shots from the movie.

Some of the stills are of Raphael's paintings. Out of backgrounds of dark carnival colors, Caribbean faces stare. Like they're looking out of a deep, rich night into this bright room. Not angry. Not happy. Glaring not at but right through the viewer. And scrawled on the canvases are phrases in spanglish and Pidgin French, slogans that when you decipher them are like bizarre ads. "Breathe Oxygen Every Day," that one over there says.

Raphael, of course, is dead. And Sparger has yet to make his dramatic entrance. It's uncool to turn and stare at new arrivals. So everybody glances out of the corner of their eyes as the door opens. It's obvious from their reactions that they see nothing but me surveying the room. I alone am aware of you. Everyone goes back to watching the murderers.

Two of them are in the room. For an event this big, the jealous sculptor who threw his wife out the thirty-story window and the coke-crazed art dealer who tortured and butchered the fashion design student both showed up. They arrived separately and alone. Once each realized the other was here, they tried to stay as far away as possible. Like both are afraid of guilt by association.

It's the chance to witness this kind of encounter that brings out the crowds. Alert as forest animals, they watch a wife killer/sculptor powerful enough to throw almost anybody out a window, a sadist/gallery owner, sleek and taut, who could be at any throat in a moment. But those things won't happen. Not to people who have survived Max's Kansas City, The Factory and Studio 54. The craziest part is that I'm here to keep out dangerous riffraff.

In the mundane world, justice is a contest between bad luck and cold cash. The sculptor walked free, the dealer only served time for tax evasion. I almost feel sorry for the murderers. Compared to some of the guests, they seem pathetic. And theirs isn't the kind of wrong that concerns the Huntsman.

Fairy Tale Justice is sure if not always swift and the punishment is appropriate. My only question is which tale gets told tonight. You smile at the question and there's a glimmer like gold, like sunfire when you do.

Seeing that, I remember how I found my place in the world. The place where I got brought up was in the Five Towns out on Long Island. Kind of a surprise, right? But I was the tough, poor kid in the soft, rich town. In school, I got kept back once or twice. And I was big to start with.

Dyslexia, as I say, was the problem. My oldest girl has it too. Now they can actually do something. Back then when I reached ninth grade, they sent me to this old lady who sat in a little office in the cellar of the school. Just her

and me.

She'd have me read and correct me. Stupid stuff. Not Dick and Jane but very simple sentences. It didn't seem to help and I hated her at first. Eventually I worked my way up to a book by the Grimm brothers. Those stories stuck with me. Maybe because I'd never read anything else. Or maybe because the old lady was a witch. No disrespect intended, in case you belong to the same union or something.

The characters I liked weren't the princes or princesses. In fairy tales, they're a dime a dozen. You can't tell them apart. Poor tailors and honest woodcutters didn't do it for me either. I knew what it was like to be poor if not honest.

The out-of-work soldiers, sly, smart and smoky, making deals with the devil, caught me first. Like a prophecy, you know. Because rich kids get into as much trouble as ones in the ghetto. Drugs, stolen cars, breaking and entering: whatever they did they wanted me along as protection.

But the rules are different for rich kids. When trouble came down, they all went into counseling. Thirty years ago, poor kids went in the army. Right then that meant 'Nam. I did my tour in a bad time. When it was over, I became a discharged soldier, every bit as bent and nasty and bitter as the ones in the stories. It happened the devil wasn't signing deals for souls at that moment or I would have gone that way.

Instead, I bummed around for a couple of years, then started to contact old friends. A lot of them had finished college, taken their time about it, and ended up in New York. So I followed them to this city with nothing but a dufflebag with my clothes and the only book I ever read.

But everything was in that book. New York was full of frog cabbies who were actually actor princes under a cruel spell. Cinderella waited tables in every bar. Acquaintances had started their own little kingdoms: clubs and restaurants and galleries. Sometimes those places weren't in the best neighborhoods, or the patrons forgot their good manners, or the wrong kind of people wanted to come inside. They started calling me.

Maybe a tiny bit wiser, I put the idea of the discharged soldier behind me. There's another kind of guy in a lot of the stories. He never has the major role. But I didn't want stardom. He gets different titles: forester, game keeper, the hunter. He plays key parts. And I have the feeling he's around even when he's not talked about. Every king or queen needs a royal huntsman. That at least is how it worked in the dark woods of Manhattan.

2.

THAT'S MY SECRET identity. It's because of Rinaldo Baupre that I discovered it. And it's because of him that I first saw you in action. Rinaldo is standing over there looking, as always, like he's in pain. No, the years have not been kind to

him. Drug treatment. Mental hospitals. It's like something's been tearing Mr. Baupre in two.

Sometimes with celebrities, it's amazing how much smaller they are in real life than in the media. With Rinaldo it's the opposite. I'm always surprised that he's average height and build. On first meeting, he seems pretty creepy but in no way misshapen. Inside, though, he's a dwarf, a troll.

Mr. Baupre wrote the script for Raphael! And he's treated his own part in Louis's life very sympathetically. It turns out he was the kid's mentor and inspiration. Lots of amazing changes have gotten rung on history.

Rinaldo was a fixture of the downtown scene, a poet, a sponger, a scene maker. And he had a legend. I mean, the name demanded one. So he was the illegitimate son of a French Resistance fighter who abandoned him and a minor Mexican muralist who died young.

Rinaldo is a critic. Twenty years ago, the art magazines kind of used him to keep watch at the crossroads where art and the underground intersected. People were starting to pay attention to the downtown scene. Victor Sparger had started getting hot. Victor had gone through a careful rebellion, done graffiti, nailed broken glass onto boards. Rinaldo Baupre had a small part in his rise. But mostly Victor managed himself.

By then I'd met Louis Raphael through a young photographer, Norah Classon. Norah loved Louis like he was a little brother. He was this skinny Caribbean kid, living on the street, bumming money and cigarettes and a couch to crash on.

I'm supposed to say I got knocked out the first time I looked at his work. Like everyone else apparently did. And that I could kick myself for not having the fifty bucks or whatever he was charging for a painting. In reality, the first time Norah talked me into letting Louis stay at my place I was pissed off because he got paint on my walls. And he was apologetic and cleaned it up.

That was shortly before Rinaldo discovered Raphael. Like Columbus finding America is how my wife described it. That is, America was always there, big and rich and unexploited. A lot of Indians knew about America. But Columbus talked it up where it counted.

Rinaldo was the same way. Others had the goods. But he had the contacts. And a talent for spinning. Most people can't do it. Publicity is the magic that spins gold. And once Mr. Baupre had done that for you, he never let you forget it.

Rinaldo was always real nice with me. He was too smart to insult headwaiters or gate keepers. To our faces. And I was always polite enough. But I'd gotten to see him in action with Norah Classon.

To give him credit, he saw what she had done and made sure that others noticed too. Of course, then he wanted her first born. For Norah in the days before she had children, that meant her work. And he claimed a major chunk. "Oh, this is

beautiful! Darling, I must have it!" That kind of thing. He told people that he hadn't just discovered Norah Classon, he had shaped her art.

Norah and I were stepping out back then. She had gotten a one woman Soho show. He wrote the auction catalog and wanted his name bigger than hers. When she objected, he decided to sink the whole deal.

One night in the packed bathroom at the Mudd Club, I was trying to fight my way through to the can. And I heard the unmistakable voice of Mr. Baupre saying, "I'm the only hose in this hick town gas station. You want fuel, baby, you line up here. The spot right where you're standing is where I discovered Louis Raphael. You don't know who he is!"

Someone said something I couldn't make out, a couple of other people got mentioned. Then I heard Norah's name and Rinaldo said. "Not if she begged. Ms. Classon is over and done. She's screwing doormen now. The next step is busboys."

And, yeah, I saw red. But I knew that decking Rinaldo wouldn't help Norah. These days I've got a private investigator license. I'm entitled to carry a gun if I ever want to. But a Swiss Army knife is about all I usually pack. Back then, I was still learning. I already knew enough, though, to stand aside and wait.

As Rinaldo made his way out of room, he looked at something in his hand, grimaced and threw it aside. Curious, I recovered it and stepped out of the club. Under a light on Milk Street, I unfolded a matchbook for the Thunder Ranch Bar and Grill in Wilkes-Barre. Thinking it was a joke or a trap, I was ready to toss it aside.

And this figure appeared. A radiant being, I guess I'd say. My first thought was that you were an acid flashback from the sixties. Then you spoke one word. What you said was, "RUMPLESTILTSKIN."

I didn't remember any hunter in that story. But I went home and reread it slowly, taking my time with every word like always. The girl whose future depends on her weaving straw into gold and the little man who appears and does it for her fit perfectly. She becomes queen but he's going to take her child if she can't guess his name. I still didn't see where I fit in. Then I reached the part where the queen sends out a messenger to scour the countryside for the secret name.

He's the one who comes back just before the little man appears to claim the baby and says, "At the edge of the forest where the fox and the hare say good night to each other...."

What he goes on to tell her is that he's seen a bonfire and a little man dancing and heard the song with the name Rumpelstiltskin in it. But that stuff about the fox and the rabbit gives him away. He's a hunter. It makes sense. Who else would she have sent out to comb the woods?

So I made a couple of calls, took a little trip down to Pennsylvania. I found

the trailer park outside Wilkes-Barre where a certain Mona Splevetsky lived.

Oh, there was a dance and a song all right. Thursdays were polka night at the Thunder Ranch and I got her drunk and she boogied and told me all about her son Marvin.

For people like Rinaldo their most important creation is themselves. With anyone else I would have called it the old and sorry tale of an unhappy kid who leaves his past behind. But I wasted little sympathy on Mr. Baupre.

Unlike Rumpelstiltskin, Rinaldo didn't put his foot through the floor when Norah Classon said the name Marvin Splevetsky. He was real angry. But it had so much power over him that he begged her to keep it secret and gave her back her career.

3.

A reminder of my next case is also here at Ling's Fortune Cookie tonight. That scary looking lady waiting for Victor Spanger to appear is Edith Crann, the producer of Raphael? The guy with her is an Italian industrialist. Her new husband. Edith's face is amazing, tragic but unlined, pained but cold, crazy but contained.

Bankrolling the film was a way of enhancing her investments. Edith Crann was the first important buyer of Louis's work. She had no idea of why it was good. But Rinaldo advised her and took a commission.

In the movie, Rinaldo and Victor have turned Edith into Louis Raphael's muse. It seems that the tragedy of losing her daughter is supposed to have made her sensitive to the plight of a kid thrown out on the street by his family.

Back at the time their daughter disappeared, I worked for Edith and her first husband Harris Crann. I had been hired as a bodyguard-chauffeur for young Alycia. It didn't take me long to recognize Mrs. Crann.

Everyone around knew she was an evil queen or a wicked stepmother. The only question was which story. Cinderella? Hansel and Gretel? I heard bartenders and waitresses, people who had worked for her, actually discuss this.

Alycia was seven years old when we met. Her picture was in the papers all the time. She attended Broadway openings. She was at Met galas. Any little girl likes to dress up. All children are thrilled to be out late at night. Little twitches of adulthood. But mostly kids have childhood. Missing that is death as sure as having your lungs and liver cut out.

One day I heard Mrs. Crann talk about her daughter to an interviewer. "We have long discussions about what she's going to wear. I never push her. This is what she wants." And the kid said nothing. Just looked at herself in the mirror, tried on a little powder, as if she didn't hear.

As a huntsman, I watched the animals. Like in the tales, they spoke the truth while people lied. Mr. Jimbo was the springer spaniel, brown and white, that followed the kid around. Alycia had named him when she was three. Whenever the mother put her hand on her daughter's mass of careful curls, the dog tensed. I understood what he was saying: he had taken on a job that made him feel bad inside.

Another time Mrs. Crann told someone, "I talk to Alycia in ways I never had anyone talk to me. It's amazing. I come into her room the first thing in the morning and we discuss what she has scheduled for that day." Queen Milly was the Persian cat. She got up from Alycia's lap where she was sitting and slunk out of the room. I understood: even the cat couldn't stand to listen to this.

The parakeet actually spoke, of course. "Hi gorgeous!" it said to Edith Crann.

She gave her scariest smile and asked, "Who's the fairest in the land?"

"You are!" said the parakeet. "Lady. You are!"

Then the bird flew into the next room and lighted on the little girl's shoulder. "Hi gorgeous," it said and whistled.

"Fairest...", it started to say and fell silent as the mother appeared. Her face was like a mask. But the eyes behind it were wild with anger.

Two things finally did it for me. First was seeing Alycia trying to skip like every seven-year-old does. Except she was wearing high heels and tripped. The second was the picture of her in a leather outfit. She was posed in what was supposed to be a worldly and sophisticated way. The idea, maybe, was to be cute. But her eyes under false lashes looked lost and desperate.

In Fairy Tales, everyone's a prince or a princess. Stepmothers move in to perform wicked deeds. In real life no one's a princess and parents do their own dirty work. The parts of the story are just that, parts. They're all shaken up and reassembled when you actually encounter them.

What Edith Crann was doing was stealing her daughter's most precious possession, her childhood. Seeing her parents, I knew that Edith herself probably hadn't had one. They were a loveless pair of sticks. I almost felt sorry for Edith. Alycia didn't like those grandparents either. I know because we talked all the time in the car. She sat up front with me. Going to her mother's parents, she'd fall silent. They'd look at her and wouldn't crack a smile.

With her father's side of the family it was different. Harris Crann's family had gotten bigger and dumber with each generation. Harris was six foot tall and Ivy League. Waspy and stiff as a board. If he saw what was being done to his kid, he never let on.

His parents were, maybe, five foot six but big on museum and opera boards. And they had established a charitable foundation. In the city, they had this huge

co-op up on Riverside Drive, several floors, countless rooms. Kind of pretentious. But when they saw their granddaughter, their eyes lit up.

Once I took her up there and they weren't home. Alycia smiled which she didn't do a lot and beckoned me down a hall like she was showing me this great secret. We went up some stairs and into this whole separate apartment within the larger one. That's where I met her great-grandparents.

Theodore and Heddy Kranneki were ancient and tiny. They had founded the family fortune long ago. They spent part of the year in the Homeland. They had done lots of work for the independence movement there. Probably they were little to start with but now they were no bigger than their granddaughter. They were entertaining some friends equally old and small. And smart still, with amazingly bright eyes behind bifocals. They looked at the kid in her leather outfit as she tottered on heels to hug them. Their eyes met mine and we all understood exactly what had to happen.

So now we had the wicked stepmother and the magic little people in place. And the huntsman. That's all the identity the story gives. He's a royal employee, as I see it. One day he's told to take the little girl out in the woods, kill her and bring back her liver and lungs as proof he's done it.

The boss's wife has given him the orders. But he looks at the little girl and she's so beautiful he can't. Thinking that the wild animals will kill her, the huntsman lets her go and brings back a young boar's liver and lungs. These the queen has the cook boil in salted water then eats. I'll be fair to Edith Crann, she was into more sophisticated dining.

The day came when I was supposed to drive Alycia up to the Hotel Pierre. Edith's parents were going to meet her and take her on vacation. Alycia wasn't looking forward to that at all.

Under everything her mother had done to her, she had the beauty that's given to all kids, however the world may bend and warp it. When we were in the car together, we used to sing songs like I do with my own kids now. Old corny stuff. "Singing in the Rain" when it was raining. "A Little Help from My Friends," when one of us was down. Or I'd tell her stories.

That particular day I told her Snow White. Not because she didn't know the story, but for the same reason I'm telling you: to make it clear in my own mind what led up to this situation and what will happen afterward.

Alycia understood. She was crying when I came to the part about the huntsman and the woods. We got up to the Pierre and there was a delivery truck broken down right in front of the hotel just as I'd been told there would be. As instructed, I parked down the block. The kid got out and stood on the curb while I went around to get her bags out of the trunk. In their prime, Ted and Heddy Kranneki must really have been something. I turned away and on a gray morning there was a flash like sunlight reflecting on a passing rearview mirror. Magic. When I turned back, Alycia was gone.

It was THE hot New York story for a couple of weeks. Cops grilled me. Reporters wanted my story. The question was whether I was an idiot or an accomplice. I had expected that. Alycia's picture was in the papers and on TV. Posters were everywhere. The thing was, Edith Crann couldn't help herself. The picture she used showed the kid in a slinky dress and a tortured expression.

People began to wonder about little Alycia's home life. That summer there was a nasty mayoral primary and a racial killing in Brooklyn, the Mets arose from the dead and ran for the pennant, someone named Louis Raphael came out of nowhere and took the art world by storm. Rumors circulated that Alycia had been seen in various places. But no new leads appeared. The Crann kidnapping story quietly died.

That summer also Norah Classon and I both started going out with other people. Somehow, it didn't make me as happy as I thought it was going to. And it didn't give her more time for her career as she thought it would. I heard that she was having booze troubles. Probably the same stories were going around about me. A couple, friends of us both, invited me out to the Hamptons for the weekend because Norah was staying nearby. But when I dropped around to see her, she had left for Fire Island. When I took the ferry over there, she was gone.

There is no tale where we see the huntsman get his rewards. Believe me, I've looked and I know. But that Sunday evening I took the late train back to Penn Station. Walking underground along the platform of the Long Island Railway, I wasn't paying much attention to what went on. In the gloom and humidity, I saw a figure of light. And when I looked your way, you pointed at the window of a car on the train I'd just gotten off.

Inside was a commotion, a bunch of conductors and nosy citizens standing over a sleeping woman. She looked vulnerable, beautiful, her hair long and loose. I got right onto the car, told them I knew her. They seemed doubtful. So I bent over Norah and kissed her. She woke up, put her arms around my neck and said. "Prince!" And I picked her up and carried her off the train, up all the stairs and back home.

Who's to say that the huntsman didn't get to marry above his station and have three beautiful kids? What tale says he didn't form a nice, discreet little security business, or that his wife hasn't had a good career showing her work, teaching.

When our oldest kid was little. I told her that story with certain things edited out. But I did mention the lady in the moonlight dress. When my daughter asked me who you were, I said to ask her mother.

My wife also was raised on Fairy Tales. Maybe that's what the marriage has going for it. But the book she had as a kid is different. French. There aren't a whole lot of Fairies in Grimm, in spite of the title. The French stories are choked with them. Fairy Godmothers especially. Even when they're not mentioned, you figure they're operating behind the scene.

For a long while Norah wouldn't tell me much about her Fairy Godmother. Lately, though, she's said a couple of things about you. She loved Louis, like I say, and this film has bothered the hell out of her. Which brings us to the matter at hand. People are stirring. Victor Sparger is about to make his entrance.

4.

LOUIS RAPHAEL got a lot of money very fast. It's too bad. He was basically a sweet kid at the start. His stuff grows on me, like that life-size picture in the movie still on the wall. The staring face is almost familiar, the words are like slogans you heard in dreams. He came out of nowhere and caught the attention of the world. Everyone wanted to be his friend. Then something else caught their attention and he was left strung out, crazy and deep in the hole. Nobody wanted to know him. Then he was dead, way shy of thirty. Now everyone wants to be his friend again.

That particular scene is now history. The boat has sailed, the balloons have gone up, the reputations have all been made. And anyone in the future who wants to set a movie in New York in 1980 will make it look like a Louis Raphael painting. Like they use Gershwin tunes when they want to say it's 1930.

The downtown ethic is that if you're not moving you're meat. Enter Victor Sparger. Victor was the artist who had made all the right choices, been in the right places, said the right things, donated to the right charity, bought property at the right moment. In life he had been no friend to Raphael. As a rival, he was nowhere.

But with Louis dead, Victor saw his chance to swallow him whole. He could make sure that anyone interested in Louis Raphael would have to go through Victor Sparger.

That's when his real talents came into play. He tied up all the rights to Louis's life. He enlisted the help of Rinaldo Baupre and Edith Crann. He oversaw Rinaldo's script. And in it he is Louis's best friend, his big brother, his idol in bad times. The fact that back then Victor was busy jumping on the fingers of everybody who tried to crawl out of the hole disappears from history.

Rumplestiltskin, after they guess his name, stamps so hard he puts his foot through the floor and rips himself in two trying to pull himself free. Watching Rinaldo Baupre tonight, I remember his mother telling me how Marvin Splevetsky went to New York to become a poet, a famous writer. Instead he's a supporting player in the story of others' lives. And it's tearing him apart.

Owning Louis Raphael's work has given Edith Crann a certain claim to existence. She is the sum of her possessions. She accumulates because she can't help herself. In that same way she once tried to collect the soul of a child.

A short time after Alycia disappeared, Mrs. Crann started sporting a nasty little smile. It reminded me of poison apples and long comas. I worried about

the kid. Tonight, though, Edith seems nervous. In the story, the queen's spell is broken, Snow White wakes up and falls in love. The Wicked Queen is invited to her wedding and can't refuse to go. For the wedding, iron slippers get heated over a fire. When the queen sees them, she can't help herself. She puts them on and dances until her heart bursts. Did today's mail bring Edith her invitation to Alycia's wedding? Norah and I just got ours.

Like I said, my wife grew up with a different book. Sometimes the stories are different versions of the ones I know. I've been reading them to my kids. As much of an education for me as for them. The other night, I sat down with the four-year-old and read him one I'd never looked at before, the French Little Red Riding Hood. In the story I remember, she was Little Red Cap.

I'd already been asked to do this gig and certain things about it bothered me. But I couldn't have told you what. As I read, though, I began to understand exactly what was wrong. Then I got to the end of the story and there was no huntsman who happens to be passing by. He's the one who rushes in, cuts open the belly of the wolf and saves the kid and her grandmother. In my wife's book, they get eaten and stay eaten.

It's one of the big hunter parts in the stories and it's not in the French book. All they have is some piece of smartass poetry telling us not to talk to strangers.

That bothered me until I remembered that no Fairy Godmother appeared dropping clues in Rumpelstiltskin. But you were there. You're not in Little Red Riding Hood either. So I figure since you showed up today it may mean there's a place for me in this version of the story.

Now there's a stir in the room. Victor Sparger, unshaven to just the fashionable degree, walks among us in a two-thousand-dollar workman's jumpsuit. He's smiling and sleek. The way you look, I guess, after you've swallowed someone whole. And I don't know how I'm going to cut open this particular beast.

See him one way and Louis Raphael was no innocent child. He'd come off the street and that part of his life never left him. Another way of looking at it, though, is that nobody is more trusting than a street person who puts his life in strangers' hands again and again. Or than the artist who shows everybody in the world his riches. Almost asking to be eaten whole.

As I think about that, your hand moves, a wand flashes like a laser. Something moves behind Victor and I realize the eyes in the Raphael painting have shifted. They stare, haunted, trapped, at Victor Sparger. The graffiti now says, "In Prison There Is Nothing to Breathe." And the face is Louis Raphael's.

Everyone: Rinaldo and Edith, the murderers and the Chinese drag waitresses, the battle-hardened Downtown circuit riders who you can bet have seen a lot, turn toward Sparger and say things like, "Oh, Victor, what a big film you've got!"

Sparger smiles, false modesty and vindictive triumph on his face. And he

replies, "All the better to eat you with." Or words to that effect.

Then people see the staring face, read the words on the picture above Victor's head. You nod to me that this is the moment and I reach into my pocket. They say that a Swiss Army Knife can kill in a dozen ways. I've made it a point to learn none of them. But for this it's perfect. I step forward and make a single cut across the front of the still. And, simple as magic, out leaps the one trapped inside.