

1408

As well as the ever-popular premature burial, every writer of shock/suspense tales should write at least one story about the Ghostly Room At The Inn. This is my version of that story. The only unusual thing about it is that I never intended to finish it. I wrote the first three or four pages as part of an appendix for my On Writing book, wanting to show readers how a story evolves from first draft to second. Most of all, I wanted to provide concrete examples of the principles I'd been blathering about in the text. But something nice happened: the story seduced me, and I ended up writing all of it. I think that what scares us varies widely from one individual to the next (I've never been able to understand why Peruvian boomslangs give some people the creeps, for example), but this story scared me while I was working on it. It originally appeared as part of an audio compilation called Blood and Smoke, and the audio scared me even more. Scared the hell out of me. But hotel rooms are just naturally creepy places, don't you think? I mean, how many people have slept in that bed before you? How many of them were sick? How many were losing their minds? How many were perhaps thinking about reading a few final verses from the Bible in the drawer of the nightstand beside them and then hanging themselves in the closet beside the TV? Brrrr. In any case, let's check in, shall we? Here's your key . . . and you might take time to notice what those four innocent numbers add up to.

It's just down the hall.

I

Mike Enslin was still in the revolving door when he saw Olin, the manager of the Hotel Dolphin, sitting in one of the overstuffed lobby chairs. Mike's heart sank. *Maybe I should have brought the lawyer along again, after all*, he thought. Well, too late now. And even if Olin had decided to throw up another roadblock or two between Mike and room 1408, that wasn't all bad; there were compensations.

Olin was crossing the room with one pudgy hand held out as Mike left the revolving door. The Dolphin was on Sixty-first Street, around the corner from Fifth Avenue, small but smart. A man and a woman dressed in evening clothes passed Mike as he reached for Olin's hand, switching his small overnight case to his left hand in order to do it. The woman was blond, dressed in black, of course, and the light, flowery smell of her perfume seemed to summarize New York. On the mezzanine level, someone was playing "Night and Day" in the bar, as if to underline the summary.

"Mr. Enslin. Good evening."

"Mr. Olin. Is there a problem?"

Olin looked pained. For a moment he glanced around the small, smart lobby, as if for help. At the concierge's stand, a man was discussing theater tickets with his wife while the concierge himself watched them with a small, patient smile. At the front desk, a man with the rumpled look one only got after long hours in Business Class was discussing his reservation with a woman in a smart black suit that could itself have doubled for evening wear. It was business as usual at the Hotel Dolphin. There was help for everyone except poor Mr. Olin, who had fallen into the writer's clutches.

"Mr. Olin?" Mike repeated.

"Mr. Enslin . . . could I speak to you for a moment in my office?"

Well, and why not? It would help the section on room 1408, add to the ominous tone the readers of his books seemed to crave, and that wasn't all. Mike Enslin hadn't been sure until now, in spite of all the

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backing and filling; now he was. Olin was really afraid of room 1408, and of what might happen to Mike there tonight.

"Of course, Mr. Olin."

Olin, the good host, reached for Mike's bag. "Allow me."

"I'm fine with it," Mike said. "Nothing but a change of clothes and a toothbrush."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Mike said. "I'm already wearing my lucky Hawaiian shirt." He smiled. "It's the one with the ghost repellent."

Olin didn't smile back. He sighed instead, a little round man in a dark cutaway coat and a neatly knotted tie. "Very good, Mr. Enslin. Follow me."

The hotel manager had seemed tentative in the lobby, almost beaten. In his oak-paneled office, with the pictures of the hotel on the walls (the Dolphin had opened in 1910—Mike might publish without the benefit of reviews in the journals or the big-city papers, but he did his research), Olin seemed to gain assurance again. There was a Persian carpet on the floor. Two standing lamps cast a mild yellow light. A desk-lamp with a green lozenge-shaped shade stood on the desk, next to a humidior. And next to the humidior were Mike Enslin's last three books. Paperback editions, of course; there had been no hardbacks. *Mine host has been doing a little research of his own*, Mike thought.

Mike sat down in front of the desk. He expected Olin to sit behind the desk, but Olin surprised him. He took the chair beside Mike's, crossed his legs, then leaned forward over his tidy little belly to touch the humidior.

"Cigar, Mr. Enslin?"

"No, thank you. I don't smoke."

Olin's eyes shifted to the cigarette behind Mike's right ear—parked on a jaunty jut the way an old-time wisecracking reporter might have parked his next smoke just below the PRESS tag stuck in the band of his fedora. The cigarette had become so much a part of him that for a moment Mike honestly didn't know what Olin was

looking at. Then he laughed, took it down, looked at it himself, and looked back at Olin.

“Haven’t had a one in nine years,” he said. “Had an older brother who died of lung cancer. I quit after he died. The cigarette behind the ear . . .” He shrugged. “Part affectation, part superstition, I guess. Like the Hawaiian shirt. Or the cigarettes you sometimes see on people’s desks or walls, mounted in a little box with a sign saying BREAK GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY. Is 1408 a smoking room, Mr. Olin? Just in case nuclear war breaks out?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Well,” Mike said heartily, “that’s one less worry in the watches of the night.”

Mr. Olin sighed again, but this sigh didn’t have the disconsolate quality of his lobby-sigh. Yes, it was the office, Mike reckoned. *Olin’s* office, his special place. Even this afternoon, when Mike had come accompanied by Robertson, the lawyer, Olin had seemed less flustered once they were in here. And why not? Where else could you feel in charge, if not in your special place? Olin’s office was a room with good pictures on the walls, a good rug on the floor, and good cigars in the humidor. A lot of managers had no doubt conducted a lot of business in here since 1910; in its own way it was as New York as the blond in her black off-the-shoulder dress, her smell of perfume, and her unarticulated promise of sleek New York sex in the small hours of the morning.

“You still don’t think I can talk you out of this idea of yours, do you?” Olin asked.

“I know you can’t,” Mike said, replacing the cigarette behind his ear. He didn’t slick his hair back with *Vitalis* or *Wildroot Cream Oil*, as those colorful fedora-wearing scribblers of yore had, but he still changed the cigarette every day, just as he changed his underwear. You sweat back there behind your ears; if he examined the cigarette at the end of the day before throwing its unsmoked deadly length into the toilet, Mike could see the faint yellow-orange residue of that sweat on the thin white paper. It did not increase the temptation to light up. How he had smoked for almost twenty years—thirty butts a day,

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sometimes forty—was now beyond him. *Why* he had done it was an even better question.

Olin picked up the little stack of paperbacks from the blotter. “I sincerely hope you’re wrong.”

Mike ran open the zipper on the side pocket of his overnight bag. He brought out a Sony minicorder. “Would you mind if I taped our conversation, Mr. Olin?”

Olin waved a hand. Mike pushed RECORD and the little red light came on. The reels began to turn.

Olin, meanwhile, was shuffling slowly through the stack of books, reading the titles. As always when he saw his books in someone else’s hands, Mike Enslin felt the oddest mix of emotions: pride, unease, amusement, defiance, and shame. He had no business feeling ashamed of them, they had kept him nicely over these last five years, and he didn’t have to share any of the profits with a packager (“book-whores” was what his agent called them, perhaps partly in envy), because he had come up with the concept himself. Although after the first book had sold so well, only a moron could have missed the concept. What was there to do after *Frankenstein* but *Bride of Frankenstein*?

Still, he had gone to Iowa. He had studied with Jane Smiley. He had once been on a panel with Stanley Elkin. He had once aspired (absolutely no one in his current circle of friends and acquaintances had any least inkling of this) to be published as a Yale Younger Poet. And, when the hotel manager began speaking the titles aloud, Mike found himself wishing he hadn’t challenged Olin with the recorder. Later he would listen to Olin’s measured tones and imagine he heard contempt in them. He touched the cigarette behind his ear without being aware of it.

“*Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Houses*,” Olin read. “*Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Graveyards*. *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Castles*.” He looked up at Mike with a faint smile at the corners of his mouth. “Got to Scotland on that one. Not to mention the Vienna Woods. And all tax-deductible, correct? Hauntings are, after all, your business.”

“Do you have a point?”

“You’re sensitive about these, aren’t you?” Olin asked.

“Sensitive, yes. Vulnerable, no. If you’re hoping to persuade me out of your hotel by critiquing my books—”

“No, not at all. I was curious, that’s all. I sent Marcel—he’s the concierge on days—out to get them two days ago, when you first appeared with your . . . request.”

“It was a demand, not a request. Still is. You heard Mr. Robertson; New York State law—not to mention two federal civil rights laws—forbids you to deny me a specific room, if I request that specific room and the room is vacant. And 1408 is vacant. 1408 is *always* vacant these days.”

But Mr. Olin was not to be diverted from the subject of Mike’s last three books—*New York Times* best-sellers, all—just yet. He simply shuffled through them a third time. The mellow lamplight reflected off their shiny covers. There was a lot of purple on the covers. Purple sold scary books better than any other color, Mike had been told.

“I didn’t get a chance to dip into these until earlier this evening,” Olin said. “I’ve been quite busy. I usually am. The Dolphin is small by New York standards, but we run at ninety per cent occupancy and usually a problem comes through the front door with every guest.”

“Like me.”

Olin smiled a little. “I’d say you’re a bit of a special problem, Mr. Enslin. You and your Mr. Robertson and all your threats.”

Mike felt nettled all over again. He had made no threats, unless Robertson himself was a threat. And he had been forced to use the lawyer, as a man might be forced to use a crowbar on a rusty lockbox which would no longer accept the key.

The lockbox isn’t yours, a voice inside told him, but the laws of the state and the country said differently. The laws said that room 1408 in the Hotel Dolphin was his if he wanted it, and as long as no one else had it first.

He became aware that Olin was watching him, still with that faint smile. As if he had been following Mike’s interior dialogue almost word for word. It was an uncomfortable feeling, and Mike was finding this an unexpectedly uncomfortable meeting. It felt as if he had

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been on the defensive ever since he'd taken out the minicorder (which was usually intimidating) and turned it on.

"If any of this has a point, Mr. Olin, I'm afraid I lost sight of it a turn or two back. And I've had a long day. If our wrangle over room 1408 is really over, I'd like to go on upstairs and—"

"I read one . . . uh, what would you call them? Essays? Tales?"

Bill-payers was what Mike called them, but he didn't intend to say that with the tape running. Not even though it was his tape.

"Story," Olin decided. "I read one story from each book. The one about the Rilsby house in Kansas from your *Haunted Houses* book—"

"Ah, yes. The axe murders." The fellow who had chopped up all six members of the Eugene Rilsby family had never been caught.

"Exactly so. And the one about the night you spent camped out on the graves of the lovers in Alaska who committed suicide—the ones people keep claiming to see around Sitka—and the account of your night in Gartsby Castle. That was actually quite amusing. I was surprised."

Mike's ear was carefully tuned to catch the undernotes of contempt in even the blindest comments about his *Ten Nights* books, and he had no doubt that he sometimes heard contempt that wasn't there—few creatures on earth are so paranoid as the writer who believes, deep in his heart, that he is slumming, Mike had discovered—but he didn't believe there was any contempt here.

"Thank you," he said. "I guess." He glanced down at his minicorder. Usually its little red eye seemed to be watching the other guy, daring him to say the wrong thing. This evening it seemed to be looking at Mike himself.

"Oh yes, I meant it as a compliment." Olin tapped the books. "I expect to finish these . . . but for the writing. It's the writing I like. I was surprised to find myself laughing at your quite unsupernatural adventures in Gartsby Castle, and I was surprised to find you as good as you are. As *subtle* as you are. I expected more hack and slash."

Mike steeled himself for what would almost certainly come next, Olin's variation of *What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this*. Olin

the urbane hotelier, host to blond women who wore black dresses out into the night, hirer of weedy, retiring men who wore tuxes and tinkled old standards like “Night and Day” in the hotel bar. Olin who probably read Proust on his nights off.

“But they are disturbing, too, these books. If I hadn’t looked at them, I don’t think I would have bothered waiting for you this evening. Once I saw that lawyer with his briefcase, I knew you meant to stay in that goddamned room, and that nothing I could say was apt to dissuade you. But the books . . .”

Mike reached out and snapped off the minicorder—that little red staring eye was starting to give him the willies. “Do you want to know why I’m bottom-feeding? Is that it?”

“I assume you do it for the money,” Olin said mildly. “And you’re feeding a long way from the bottom, at least in my estimation . . . although it’s interesting that you would jump so nimbly to such a conclusion.”

Mike felt warmth rising in his cheeks. No, this wasn’t going the way he had expected at all; he had *never* snapped his recorder off in the middle of a conversation. But Olin wasn’t what he had seemed. *I was led astray by his hands*, Mike thought. *Those pudgy little hotel manager’s hands with their neat white crescents of manicured nail.*

“What concerned me—what *frightened* me—is that I found myself reading the work of an intelligent, talented man who doesn’t believe *one single thing* he has written.”

That wasn’t exactly true, Mike thought. He’d written perhaps two dozen stories he believed in, had actually published a few. He’d written reams of poetry he believed in during his first eighteen months in New York, when he had starved on the payroll of *The Village Voice*. But did he believe that the headless ghost of Eugene Rilsby walked his deserted Kansas farmhouse by moonlight? No. He had spent the night in that farmhouse, camped out on the dirty linoleum hills of the kitchen floor, and had seen nothing scarier than two mice trundling along the baseboard. He had spent a hot summer night in the ruins of the Transylvanian castle where Vlad Tepes supposedly still held court; the only vampires to actually show up had been a fog of

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European mosquitoes. During the night camped out by the grave of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, a white, blood-streaked figure waving a knife *had* come at him out of the two o'clock darkness, but the giggles of the apparition's friends had given him away, and Mike Enslin hadn't been terribly impressed, anyway; he knew a teenage ghost waving a rubber knife when he saw one. But he had no intention of telling any of this to Olin. He couldn't afford—

Except he *could*. The minicorder (a mistake from the getgo, he now understood) was stowed away again, and this meeting was about as off-the-record as you could get. Also, he had come to admire Olin in a weird way. And when you admired a man, you wanted to tell him the truth.

"No," he said, "I don't believe in ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties. I think it's good there are no such things, because I don't believe there's any good Lord that can protect us from them, either. That's what I believe, but I've kept an open mind from the very start. I may never win the Pulitzer Prize for investigating The Barking Ghost in Mount Hope Cemetery, but I would have written fairly about him if he had shown up."

Olin said something, only a single word, but too low for Mike to make it out.

"I beg pardon?"

"I said no." Olin looked at him almost apologetically.

Mike sighed. Olin thought he was a liar. When you got to that point, the only choices were to put up your dukes or disengage totally from the discussion. "Why don't we leave this for another day, Mr. Olin? I'll just go on upstairs and brush my teeth. Perhaps I'll see Kevin O'Malley materialize behind me in the bathroom mirror."

Mike started to get out of his chair, and Olin put out one of his pudgy, carefully manicured hands to stop him. "I'm not calling you a liar," he said, "but, Mr. Enslin, *you don't believe*. Ghosts rarely appear to those who don't believe in them, and when they do, they are rarely seen. Why, Eugene Rilsby could have bowled his severed head all the way down the front hall of his home, and you wouldn't have heard a thing!"

Mike stood up, then bent to grab his overnight case. "If that's so, I won't have anything to worry about in room 1408, will I?"

"But you will," Olin said. "You will. Because there are no ghosts in room 1408 and never have been. There's *something* in there—I've felt it myself—but it's not a spirit presence. In an abandoned house or an old castle keep, your unbelief may serve you as protection. In room 1408, it will only render you more vulnerable. Don't do it, Mr. Enslin. That's why I waited for you tonight, to ask you, *beg* you, not to do it. Of all the people on earth who don't belong in that room, the man who wrote those cheerful, exploitative true-ghost books leads the list."

Mike heard this and didn't hear it at the same time. *And you turned off your tape recorder!* he was raving. *He embarrasses me into turning off my tape recorder and then he turns into Boris Karloff hosting The All-Star Spook Weekend! Fuck it. I'll quote him anyway. If he doesn't like it, let him sue me.*

All at once he was burning to get upstairs, not just so he could start getting his long night in a corner hotel room over with, but because he wanted to transcribe what Olin had just said while it was still fresh in his mind.

"Have a drink, Mr. Enslin."

"No, I really—"

Mr. Olin reached into his coat pocket and brought out a key on a long brass paddle. The brass looked old and scratched and tarnished. Embossed on it were the numbers 1408. "Please," Olin said. "Humor me. You give me ten more minutes of your time—long enough to consume a short Scotch—and I'll hand you this key. I would give almost anything to be able to change your mind, but I like to think I can recognize the inevitable when I see it."

"You still use actual keys here?" Mike asked. "That's sort of a nice touch. Antiquey."

"The Dolphin went to a MagCard system in 1979, Mr. Enslin, the year I took the job as manager. 1408 is the only room in the house that still opens with a key. There was no need to put a MagCard lock

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on its door, because there's never anyone inside; the room was last occupied by a paying guest in 1978."

"You're shitting me!" Mike sat down again, and unlimbered his minicorder again. He pushed the RECORD button and said, "House manager Olin claims 1408 not rented to a paying guest in over twenty years."

"It is just as well that 1408 has never needed a MagCard lock on its door, because I am completely positive the device wouldn't work. Digital wristwatches don't work in room 1408. Sometimes they run backward, sometimes they simply go out, but you can't tell time with one. Not in room 1408, you can't. The same is true of pocket calculators and cell-phones. If you're wearing a beeper, Mr. Enslin, I advise you to turn it off, because once you're in room 1408, it will start beeping at will." He paused. "And turning it off isn't guaranteed to work, either; it may turn itself back on. The only sure cure is to pull the batteries." He pushed the STOP button on the minicorder without examining the buttons; Mike supposed he used a similar model for dictating memos. "Actually, Mr. Enslin, the only sure cure is to stay the hell out of that room."

"I can't do that," Mike said, taking his minicorder back and stowing it once more, "but I think I can take time for that drink."

While Olin poured from the fumed-oak bar beneath an oil painting of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century, Mike asked him how, if the room had been continuously unoccupied since 1978, Olin knew that high-tech gadgets didn't work inside.

"I didn't intend to give you the impression that no one had set foot through the door since 1978," Olin replied. "For one thing, there are maids in once a month to give the place a light turn. That means—"

Mike, who had been working on *Ten Haunted Hotel Rooms* for about four months at that point, said: "I know what it means." A light turn in an unoccupied room would include opening the windows to change the air, dusting, enough Ty-D-Bowl in the can to turn the

water briefly blue, a change of the towels. Probably not the bed-linen, not on a light turn. He wondered if he should have brought his sleeping-bag.

Crossing the Persian from the bar with their drinks in his hands, Olin seemed to read Mike's thought on his face. "The sheets were changed this very afternoon, Mr. Enslin."

"Why don't you drop that? Call me Mike."

"I don't think I'd be comfortable with that," Olin said, handing Mike his drink. "Here's to you."

"And you." Mike lifted his glass, meaning to clink it against Olin's, but Olin pulled his back.

"No, to you, Mr. Enslin. I insist. Tonight we should both drink to you. You'll need it."

Mike sighed, clinked the rim of his glass against the rim of Olin's, and said: "To me. You would have been right at home in a horror movie, Mr. Olin. You could have played the gloomy old butler who tries to warn the young married couple away from Castle Doom."

Olin sat down. "It's a part I haven't had to play often, thank God. Room 1408 isn't listed on any of the websites dealing with paranormal locations or psychic hotspots—"

That'll change after my book, Mike thought, sipping his drink.

"—and there are no ghost-tours with stops at the Hotel Dolphin, although they do tour through the Sherry-Netherland, the Plaza, and the Park Lane. We have kept 1408 as quiet as possible . . . although, of course, the history has always been there for a researcher who is both lucky and tenacious."

Mike allowed himself a small smile.

"Veronique changed the sheets," Olin said. "I accompanied her. You should feel flattered, Mr. Enslin; it's almost like having your night's linen put on by royalty. Veronique and her sister came to the Dolphin as chambermaids in 1971 or '72. Vee, as we call her, is the Hotel Dolphin's longest-running employee, with at least six years' seniority over me. She has since risen to head housekeeper. I'd guess she hadn't changed a sheet in six years before today, but she used to do all the turns in 1408—she and her sister—until about 1992. Veronique and

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Celeste were twins, and the bond between them seemed to make them . . . how shall I put it? Not *immune* to 1408, but its equal . . . at least for the short periods of time needed to give a room a light turn.”

“You’re not going to tell me this Veronique’s sister died in the room, are you?”

“No, not at all,” Olin said. “She left service here around 1988, suffering from ill health. But I don’t rule out the idea that 1408 may have played a part in her worsening mental and physical condition.”

“We seem to have built a rapport here, Mr. Olin. I hope I don’t snap it by telling you I find that ridiculous.”

Olin laughed. “So hardheaded for a student of the airy world.”

“I owe it to my readers,” Mike said blandly.

“I suppose I simply could have left 1408 as it is anyway during most of its days and nights,” the hotel manager mused. “Door locked, lights off, shades drawn to keep the sun from fading the carpet, coverlet pulled up, doorknob breakfast menu on the bed . . . but I can’t bear to think of the air getting stuffy and old, like the air in an attic. Can’t bear to think of the dust piling up until it’s thick and fluffy. What does that make me, persnickety or downright obsessive?”

“It makes you a hotel manager.”

“I suppose. In any case, Vee and Cee turned that room—very quick, just in and out—until Cee retired and Vee got her first big promotion. After that, I got other maids to do it in pairs, always picking ones who got on well with each other—”

“Hoping for that bond to withstand the bogies?”

“Hoping for that bond, yes. And you can make fun of the room 1408 bogies as much as you want, Mr. Enslin, but you’ll feel them almost at once, of that I’m confident. Whatever there is in that room, it’s not shy.

“On many occasions—all that I could manage—I went with the maids, to supervise them.” He paused, then added, almost reluctantly, “To pull them out, I suppose, if anything really awful started to happen. Nothing ever did. There were several who had weeping fits, one who had a laughing fit—I don’t know why someone laughing out of control should be more frightening than someone sobbing, but it is—”

and a number who fainted. Nothing too terrible, however. I had time enough over the years to make a few primitive experiments—beepers and cell-phones and such—but nothing too terrible. Thank God.” He paused again, then added in a queer, flat tone: “One of them went blind.”

“*What?*”

“She went blind. Rommie Van Gelder, that was. She was dusting the top of the television, and all at once she began to scream. I asked her what was wrong. She dropped her dustrag and put her hands over her eyes and screamed that she was blind . . . but that she could see the most awful colors. They went away almost as soon as I got her out through the door, and by the time I got her down the hallway to the elevator, her sight had begun to come back.”

“You’re telling me all this just to scare me, Mr. Olin, aren’t you? To scare me off.”

“Indeed I am not. You know the history of the room, beginning with the suicide of its first occupant.”

Mike did. Kevin O’Malley, a sewing machine salesman, had taken his life on October 13, 1910, a leaper who had left a wife and seven children behind.

“Five men and one woman have jumped from that room’s single window, Mr. Enslin. Three women and one man have overdosed with pills in that room, two found in bed, two found in the bathroom, one in the tub and one sitting slumped on the toilet. A man hanged himself in the closet in 1970—”

“Henry Storkin,” Mike said. “That one was probably accidental . . . erotic asphyxia.”

“Perhaps. There was also Randolph Hyde, who slit his wrists, and then cut off his genitals for good measure while he was bleeding to death. *That* one wasn’t erotic asphyxiation. The point is, Mr. Enslin, that if you can’t be swayed from your intention by a record of twelve suicides in sixty-eight years, I doubt if the gasps and fibrillations of a few chambermaids will stop you.”

Gasps and fibrillations, that’s nice, Mike thought, and wondered if he could steal it for the book.

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"Few of the pairs who have turned 1408 over the years care to go back more than a few times," Olin said, and finished his drink in a tidy little gulp.

"Except for the French twins."

"Vee and Cee, that's true." Olin nodded.

Mike didn't care much about the maids and their . . . what had Olin called them? Their gasps and fibrillations. He did feel mildly rankled by Olin's enumeration of the suicides . . . as if Mike was so thick he had missed, not the *fact* of them, but their *import*. Except, really, there *was* no import. Both Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy had vice presidents named Johnson; the names Lincoln and Kennedy had seven letters; both Lincoln and Kennedy had been elected in years ending in 60. What did all of these coincidences prove? Not a damned thing.

"The suicides will make a wonderful segment for my book," Mike said, "but since the tape recorder is off, I can tell you they amount to what a statistician resource of mine calls 'the cluster effect.'"

"Charles Dickens called it 'the potato effect,'" Olin said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"When Jacob Marley's ghost first speaks to Scrooge, Scrooge tells him he could be nothing but a blob of mustard or a bit of underdone potato."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" Mike asked, a trifle coldly.

"Nothing about this strikes me as funny, Mr. Enslin. Nothing at all. Listen very closely, please. Vee's sister, Celeste, died of a heart attack. At that point, she was suffering mid-stage Alzheimer's, a disease which struck her very early in life."

"Yet her sister is fine and well, according to what you said earlier. An American success story, in fact. As you are yourself, Mr. Olin, from the look of you. Yet you've been in and out of room 1408 how many times? A hundred? Two hundred?"

"For very short periods of time," Olin said. "It's perhaps like entering a room filled with poison gas. If one holds one's breath, one may be all right. I see you don't like that comparison. You no doubt find it overwrought, perhaps ridiculous. Yet I believe it's a good one."

He steepled his fingers beneath his chin.

"It's also possible that some people react more quickly and more violently to whatever lives in that room, just as some people who go scuba-diving are more prone to the bends than others. Over the Dolphin's near-century of operation, the hotel staff has grown ever more aware that 1408 is a poisoned room. It has become part of the house history, Mr. Enslin. No one talks about it, just as no one mentions the fact that here, as in most hotels, the fourteenth floor is actually the thirteenth . . . but they know it. If all the facts and records pertaining to that room were available, they would tell an amazing story . . . one more uncomfortable than your readers might enjoy.

"I should guess, for example, that every hotel in New York has had its suicides, but I would be willing to wager my life that only in the Dolphin have there been a dozen of them *in a single room*. And leaving Celeste Romandeanu aside, what about the natural deaths in 1408? The so-called natural deaths?"

"How many have there been?" The idea of so-called natural deaths in 1408 had never occurred to him.

"Thirty," Olin replied. "Thirty, at least. Thirty that I know of."

"You're lying!" The words were out of his mouth before he could call them back.

"No, Mr. Enslin, I assure you I'm not. Did you really think that we keep that room empty just out of some vapid old wives' superstition or ridiculous New York tradition . . . the idea, maybe, that every fine old hotel should have at least one unquiet spirit, clanking around in the Suite of Invisible Chains?"

Mike Enslin realized that just such an idea—not articulated but there, just the same—had indeed been hanging around his new *Ten Nights* book. To hear Olin scoff at it in the irritated tones of a scientist scoffing at a *bruja*-waving native did nothing to soothe his chagrin.

"We have our superstitions and traditions in the hotel trade, but we don't let them get in the way of our business, Mr. Enslin. There's an old saying in the Midwest, where I broke into the business: 'There are no drafty rooms when the cattlemen are in town.' If we have empties, we fill them. The only exception to that rule I have ever made—

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and the only talk like this I have ever had—is on account of room 1408, a room on the thirteenth floor whose very numerals add up to thirteen.”

Olin looked levelly at Mike Enslin.

“It is a room not only of suicides but of strokes and heart attacks and epileptic seizures. One man who stayed in that room—this was in 1973—apparently drowned in a bowl of soup. You would undoubtedly call that ridiculous, but I spoke to the man who was head of hotel security at that time, and he saw the death certificate. The power of whatever inhabits the room seems to be less around midday, which is when the room-turns always occur, and yet I know of several maids who have turned that room who now suffer from heart problems, emphysema, diabetes. There was a heating problem on that floor three years ago, and Mr. Neal, the head maintenance engineer at that time, had to go into several of the rooms to check the heating units. 1408 was one of them. He seemed fine then—both in the room and later on—but he died the following afternoon of a massive cerebral hemorrhage.”

“Coincidence,” Mike said. Yet he could not deny that Olin was good. Had the man been a camp counselor, he would have scared ninety per cent of the kiddies back home after the first round of camp-fire ghost stories.

“Coincidence,” Olin repeated softly, not quite contemptuously. He held out the old-fashioned key on its old-fashioned brass paddle. “How is your own heart, Mr. Enslin? Not to mention your blood-pressure and psychological condition?”

Mike found it took an actual, conscious effort to lift his hand . . . but once he got it moving, it was fine. It rose to the key without even the minutest trembling at the fingertips, so far as he could see.

“All fine,” he said, grasping the worn brass paddle. “Besides, I’m wearing my lucky Hawaiian shirt.”

Olin insisted on accompanying Mike to the fourteenth floor in the elevator, and Mike did not demur. He was interested to see that, once they were out of the manager’s office and walking down the hall

which led to the elevators, the man reverted to his less consequential self; he became once again poor Mr. Olin, the flunky who had fallen into the writer's clutches.

A man in a tux—Mike guessed he was either the restaurant manager or the *maitre d'*—stopped them, offered Olin a thin sheaf of papers, and murmured to him in French. Olin murmured back, nodding, and quickly scribbled his signature on the sheets. The fellow in the bar was now playing "Autumn in New York." From this distance, it had an echoey sound, like music heard in a dream.

The man in the tuxedo said "*Merci bien*" and went on his way. Mike and the hotel manager went on theirs. Olin again asked if he could carry Mike's little valise, and Mike again refused. In the elevator, Mike found his eyes drawn to the neat triple row of buttons. Everything was where it should have been, there were no gaps . . . and yet, if you looked more closely, you saw that there was. The button marked 12 was followed by one marked 14. *As if*, Mike thought, *they could make the number nonexistent by omitting it from the control-panel of an elevator.* Foolishness . . . and yet Olin was right; it was done all over the world.

As the car rose, Mike said, "I'm curious about something. Why didn't you simply create a fictional resident for room 1408, if it scares you all as badly as you say it does? For that matter, Mr. Olin, why not declare it as your own residence?"

"I suppose I was afraid I would be accused of fraud, if not by the people responsible for enforcing state and federal civil rights statutes—hotel people feel about civil rights laws as many of your readers probably feel about clanking chains in the night—then by my bosses, if they got wind of it. If I couldn't persuade you to stay out of 1408, I doubt that I would have had much more luck in convincing the Stanley Corporation's board of directors that I took a perfectly good room off the market because I was afraid that spooks cause the occasional travelling salesman to jump out the window and splatter himself all over Sixty-first Street."

Mike found this the most disturbing thing Olin had said yet. *Because he's not trying to convince me anymore*, he thought. *Whatever salesmanship powers he had in his office—maybe it's some vibe that comes up*

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from the Persian rug—he loses it out here. Competency, yes, you could see that when he was signing the maître d's chits, but not salesmanship. Not personal magnetism. Not out here. But he believes it. He believes it all.

Above the door, the illuminated 12 went out and the 14 came on. The elevator stopped. The door slid open to reveal a perfectly ordinary hotel corridor with a red-and-gold carpet (most definitely not a Persian) and electric fixtures that looked like nineteenth-century gaslights.

“Here we are,” Olin said. “Your floor. You’ll pardon me if I leave you here. 1408 is to your left, at the end of the hall. Unless I absolutely have to, I don’t go any closer than this.”

Mike Enslin stepped out of the elevator on legs that seemed heavier than they should have. He turned back to Olin, a pudgy little man in a black coat and a carefully knotted wine-colored tie. Olin’s manicured hands were clasped behind him now, and Mike saw that the little man’s face was as pale as cream. On his high, lineless forehead, drops of perspiration stood out.

“There’s a telephone in the room, of course,” Olin said. “You could try it, if you find yourself in trouble . . . but I doubt that it will work. Not if the room doesn’t want it to.”

Mike thought of a light reply, something about how that would save him a room-service charge at least, but all at once his tongue seemed as heavy as his legs. It just lay there on the floor of his mouth.

Olin brought one hand out from behind his back, and Mike saw it was trembling. “Mr. Enslin,” he said. “Mike. Don’t do this. For God’s sake—”

Before he could finish, the elevator door slid shut, cutting him off. Mike stood where he was for a moment, in the perfect New York hotel silence of what no one on the staff would admit was the thirteenth floor of the Hotel Dolphin, and thought of reaching out and pushing the elevator’s call-button.

Except if he did that, Olin would win. And there would be a large, gaping hole where the best chapter of his new book should have been. The readers might not know that, his editor and his agent might not know it, Robertson the lawyer might not . . . but *he* would.

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Instead of pushing the call-button, he reached up and touched the cigarette behind his ear—that old, distracted gesture he no longer knew he was making—and flicked the collar of his lucky shirt. Then he started down the hallway toward 1408, swinging his overnight case by his side.

II

The most interesting artifact left in the wake of Michael Enslin's brief stay (it lasted about seventy minutes) in room 1408 was the eleven minutes of recorded tape in his minicorder, which was charred a bit but not even close to destroyed. The fascinating thing about the narration was how *little* narration there was. And how odd it became.

The minicorder had been a present from his ex-wife, with whom he had remained friendly, five years before. On his first "case expedition" (the Rilsby farm in Kansas) he had taken it almost as an afterthought, along with five yellow legal pads and a leather case filled with sharpened pencils. By the time he reached the door of room 1408 in the Hotel Dolphin three books later, he came with a single pen and notebook, plus five fresh ninety-minute cassettes in addition to the one he had loaded into the machine before leaving his apartment.

He had discovered that narration served him better than note-taking; he was able to catch anecdotes, some of them pretty damned great, as they happened—the bats that had dive-bombed him in the supposedly haunted tower of Gartsby Castle, for instance. He had shrieked like a girl on her first trip through a carny haunted house. Friends hearing this were invariably amused.

The little tape recorder was more practical than written notes, too, especially when you were in a chilly New Brunswick graveyard and a squall of rain and wind collapsed your tent at three in the morning. You couldn't take very successful notes in such circumstances, but you *could* talk . . . which was what Mike had done, gone on talking as he struggled out of the wet, flapping canvas of his tent, never losing sight of the minicorder's comforting red eye. Over the years and the "case

expeditions,” the Sony minicorder had become his friend. He had never recorded a first-hand account of a true supernatural event on the filament-thin ribbon of tape running between its reels, and that included the broken comments he made while in 1408, but it was probably not surprising that he had arrived at such feelings of affection for the gadget. Long-haul truckers come to love their Kenworths and Jimmy-Petes; writers treasure a certain pen or battered old typewriter; professional cleaning ladies are loath to give up the old Electrolux. Mike had never had to stand up to an actual ghost or psychokinetic event with only the minicorder—his version of a cross and a bunch of garlic—to protect him, but it had been there on plenty of cold, uncomfortable nights. He was hardheaded, but that didn’t make him inhuman.

His problems with 1408 started even before he got into the room.

The door was crooked.

Not by a lot, but it was crooked, all right, canted just the tiniest bit to the left. It made him think first of scary movies where the director tried to indicate mental distress in one of the characters by tipping the camera on the point-of-view shots. This association was followed by another one—the way doors looked when you were on a boat and the weather was a little heavy. Back and forth they went, right and left they went, tick and tock they went, until you started to feel a bit woozy in your head and stomach. Not that he felt that way himself, not at all, but—

Yes, I do. Just a little.

And he would say so, too, if only because of Olin’s insinuation that his attitude made it impossible for him to be fair in the undoubtedly subjective field of spook journalism.

He bent over (aware that the slightly woozy feeling in his stomach left as soon as he was no longer looking at that subtly off-kilter door), unzipped the pocket on his overnighter, and took out his minicorder. He pushed RECORD as he straightened up, saw the little red eye go on, and opened his mouth to say, “The door of room 1408 offers its own unique greeting; it appears to have been set crooked, tipped slightly to the left.”

He said *The door*, and that's all. If you listen to the tape, you can hear both words clearly, *The door* and then the click of the STOP button. Because the door *wasn't* crooked. It was perfectly straight. Mike turned, looked at the door of 1409 across the hall, then back at the door of 1408. Both doors were the same, white with gold number-plaques and gold doorknobs. Both perfectly straight.

Mike bent, picked up his overnight case with the hand holding the minicorder, moved the key in his other hand toward the lock, then stopped again.

The door was crooked again.

This time it tilted slightly to the right.

"This is ridiculous," Mike murmured, but that woozy feeling had already started in his stomach again. It wasn't just *like* seasickness; it *was* seasickness. He had crossed to England on the *QE2* a couple of years ago, and one night had been extremely rough. What Mike remembered most clearly was lying on the bed in his stateroom, always on the verge of throwing up but never quite able to do it. And how the feeling of nauseated vertigo got worse if you looked at a doorway . . . or a table . . . or a chair . . . at how they would go back and forth . . . right and left . . . tick and tock . . .

This is Olin's fault, he thought. *Exactly what he wants. He built you up for it, buddy. He set you up for it. Man, how he'd laugh if he could see you. How—*

His thoughts broke off as he realized Olin very likely *could* see him. Mike looked back down the corridor toward the elevator, barely noticing that the slightly whoopsy feeling in his stomach left the moment he stopped staring at the door. Above and to the left of the elevators, he saw what he had expected: a closed-circuit camera. One of the house dicks might be looking at it this very moment, and Mike was willing to bet that Olin was right there with him, both of them grinning like apes. *Teach him to come in here and start throwing his weight and his lawyer around*, Olin says. *Lookit him!* the security man replies, grinning more widely than ever. *White as a ghost himself, and he hasn't even touched the key to the lock yet. You got him, boss! Got him book, line, and sinker!*

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Damned if you do, Mike thought. *I stayed in the Rilsby house, slept in the room where at least two of them were killed—and I did sleep, whether you believed it or not. I spent a night right next to Jeffrey Dahmer's grave and another two stones over from H. P. Lovecraft's; I brushed my teeth next to the tub where Sir David Smythe supposedly drowned both of his wives. I stopped being scared of campfire stories a long time ago. I'll be damned if you do!*

He looked back at the door and the door was straight. He grunted, pushed the key into the lock, and turned it. The door opened. Mike stepped in. The door did not swing slowly shut behind him as he felt for the light switch, leaving him in total darkness (besides, the lights of the apartment building next door shone through the window). He found the switch. When he flicked it, the overhead light, enclosed in a collection of dangling crystal ornaments, came on. So did the standing lamp by the desk on the far side of the room.

The window was above this desk, so someone sitting there writing could pause in his work and look out on Sixty-first Street . . . or *jump* out on Sixty-first, if the urge so took him. Except—

Mike set down his bag just inside the door, closed the door, and pushed RECORD again. The little red light went on.

“According to Olin, six people have jumped from the window I’m looking at,” he said, “but I won’t be taking any dives from the fourteenth—excuse me, the *thirteenth*—floor of the Hotel Dolphin tonight. There’s an iron or steel mesh grille over the outside. Better safe than sorry. 1408 is what you’d call a junior suite, I guess. The room I’m in has two chairs, a sofa, a writing desk, a cabinet that probably contains the TV and maybe a minibar. Carpet on the floor is unremarkable—not a patch on Olin’s, believe me. Wallpaper, ditto. It . . . wait . . .”

At this point the listener hears another click on the tape as Mike hits the STOP button again. All the scant narration on the tape has that same fragmentary quality, which is utterly unlike the other hundred and fifty or so tapes in his literary agent’s possession. In addition, his voice grows steadily more distracted; it is not the voice of a man at work, but of a perplexed individual who has begun talking to himself without realizing it. The elliptical nature of the tapes and that grow-

ing verbal distraction combine to give most listeners a distinct feeling of unease. Many ask that the tape be turned off long before the end is reached. Mere words on a page cannot adequately convey a listener's growing conviction that he is hearing a man lose, if not his mind, then his hold on conventional reality, but even the flat words themselves suggest that *something* was happening.

What Mike had noticed at that point were the pictures on the walls. There were three of them: a lady in twenties-style evening dress standing on a staircase, a sailing ship done in the fashion of Currier & Ives, and a still life of fruit, the latter painted with an unpleasant yellow-orange cast to the apples as well as the oranges and bananas. All three pictures were in glass frames and all three were crooked. He had been about to mention the crookedness on tape, but what was so unusual, so worthy of comment, about three off-kilter pictures? That a *door* should be crooked . . . well, that had a little of that old *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* charm. But the door *hadn't* been crooked; his eyes had tricked him for a moment, that was all.

The lady on the stairs tilted left. So did the sailing ship, which showed bell-bottomed British tars lining the rail to watch a school of flying fish. The yellowish-orange fruit—to Mike it looked like a bowl of fruit painted by the light of a suffocating equatorial sun, a Paul Bowles desert sun—tilted to the right. Although he was not ordinarily a fussy man, he circled the room, setting them straight. Looking at them crooked like that was making him feel a touch nauseated again. He wasn't entirely surprised, either. One grew susceptible to the feeling; he had discovered that on the *QE 2*. He had been told that if one persevered through that period of increased susceptibility, one usually adapted . . . "got your sealegs," some of the old hands still said. Mike hadn't done enough sailing to get his sealegs, nor cared to. These days he stuck with his land legs, and if straightening the three pictures in the unremarkable sitting room of 1408 would settle his midsection, good for him.

There was dust on the glass covering the pictures. He trailed his fingers across the still life and left two parallel streaks. The dust had a greasy, slippery feel. *Like silk just before it rots* was what came into his

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mind, but he was damned if he was going to put that on tape, either. How was *he* supposed to know what silk felt like just before it rotted? It was a drunk's thought.

When the pictures were set to rights, he stepped back and surveyed them in turn: the evening-dressed lady by the door leading into the bedroom, the ship plying one of the seven seas to the left of the writing desk, and finally the nasty (and quite badly painted) fruit by the TV cabinet. Part of him expected that they would be crooked again, or fall crooked as he looked at them—that was the way things happened in movies like *House on Haunted Hill* and in old episodes of *The Twilight Zone*—but the pictures remained perfectly straight, as he had fixed them. Not, he told himself, that he would have found anything supernatural or paranormal in a return to their former crooked state; in his experience, reversion was the nature of things—people who had given up smoking (he touched the cigarette cocked behind his ear without being aware of it) wanted to go on smoking, and pictures that had been hanging crooked since Nixon was President wanted to go on hanging crooked. *And they've been here a long time, no doubt about that*, Mike thought. *If I lifted them away from the walls, I'd see lighter patches on the wallpaper. Or bugs squirming out, the way they do when you turn over a rock.*

There was something both shocking and nasty about this idea; it came with a vivid image of blind white bugs oozing out of the pale and formerly protected wallpaper like living pus.

Mike raised the minicorder, pushed RECORD, and said: "Olin has certainly started a train of thought in my head. Or a chain of thought, which is it? He set out to give me the heebie-jeebies, and he certainly succeeded. I don't mean . . ." Didn't mean what? To be racist? Was "heebie-jeebies" short for *Hebrew* jeebies? But that was ridiculous. That would be "Hebrew-jeebrews," a phrase which was meaningless. It—

On the tape at this point, flat and perfectly articulated, Mike Enslin says: "I've got to get hold of myself. Right now." This is followed by another click as he shuts the tape off again.

He closed his eyes and took four long, measured breaths, holding each one in to a five-count before letting it out again. Nothing like

this had ever happened to him—not in the supposedly haunted houses, the supposedly haunted graveyards, or the supposedly haunted castles. This wasn't like being haunted, or what he imagined being haunted would be like; this was like being stoned on bad, cheap dope.

Olin did this. Olin hypnotized you, but you're going to break out of it. You're going to spend the goddamned night in this room, and not just because it's the best location you've ever been in—leave out Olin and you've got damned near enough for the ghost-story of the decade already—but because Olin doesn't get to win. Him and his bullshit story about how thirty people have died in here, they don't get to win. I'm the one in charge of bullshit around here, so just breathe in . . . and out. Breathe in . . . and out. In . . . and out . . .

He went on like that for nearly ninety seconds, and when he opened his eyes again, he felt normal. The pictures on the wall? Still straight. Fruit in the bowl? Still yellow-orange and uglier than ever. Desert fruit for sure. Eat one piece of that and you'd shit until it hurt.

He pushed RECORD. The red eye went on. "I had a little vertigo for a minute or two," he said, crossing the room to the writing desk and the window with its protective mesh outside. "It might have been a hangover from Olin's yarning, but I could believe I feel a genuine presence here." He felt no such thing, of course, but once that was on tape he could write almost anything he pleased. "The air is stale. Not musty or foul-smelling, Olin said the place gets aired every time it gets turned, but the turns are quick and . . . yeah . . . it's stale. Hey, look at this."

There was an ashtray on the writing desk, one of those little ones made of thick glass that you used to see in hotels everywhere, and in it was a book of matches. On the front was the Hotel Dolphin. In front of the hotel stood a smiling doorman in a very old-fashioned uniform, the kind with shoulder-boards, gold frogging, and a cap that looked as if it belonged in a gay bar, perched on the head of a motorcycle ramrod wearing nothing else but a few silver body-rings. Going back and forth on Fifth Avenue in front of the hotel were cars from another era—Packards and Hudsons, Studebakers and finny Chrysler New Yorkers.

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"The matchbook in the ashtray looks like it comes from about 1955," Mike said, and slipped it into the pocket of his lucky Hawaiian shirt. "I'm keeping it as a souvenir. Now it's time for a little fresh air."

There is a clunk as he sets the minicorder down, presumably on the writing desk. There is a pause followed by vague sounds and a couple of effortful grunts. After these come a second pause and then a squeaking sound. "Success!" he says. This is a little off-mike, but the follow-up is closer.

"Success!" Mike repeated, picking the minicorder up off the desk. "The bottom half wouldn't budge . . . it's like it's nailed shut . . . but the top half came down all right. I can hear the traffic on Fifth Avenue, and all the beeping horns have a comforting quality. Someone is playing a saxophone, perhaps in front of the Plaza, which is across the street and two blocks down. It reminds me of my brother."

Mike stopped abruptly, looking at the little red eye. It seemed to accuse him. Brother? His brother was dead, another fallen soldier in the tobacco wars. Then he relaxed. What of it? These were the spook wars, where Michael Enslin had always come off the winner. As for Donald Enslin . . .

"My brother was actually eaten by wolves one winter on the Connecticut Turnpike," he said, then laughed and pushed STOP. There is more on the tape—a little more—but that is the final statement of any coherence . . . the final statement, that is, to which a clear meaning can be ascribed.

Mike turned on his heels and looked at the pictures. Still hanging perfectly straight, good little pictures that they were. That still life, though—what an ugly fucking thing that was!

He pushed RECORD and spoke two words—*fuming oranges*—into the minicorder. Then he turned it off again and walked across the room to the door leading into the bedroom. He paused by the evening-dressed lady and reached into the darkness, feeling for the light switch. He had just one moment to register

(it feels like skin like old dead skin)

something wrong with the wallpaper under his sliding palm, and

then his fingers found the switch. The bedroom was flooded with yellow light from another of those ceiling fixtures buried in hanging glass baubles. The bed was a double hiding under a yellow-orange coverlet.

“Why say hiding?” Mike asked the minicorder, then pushed the STOP button again. He stepped in, fascinated by the fuming desert of the coverlet, by the tumorous bulges of the pillows beneath it. Sleep there? Not at all, sir! It would be like sleeping inside that goddam still life, sleeping in that horrible hot Paul Bowles room you couldn’t quite see, a room for lunatic expatriate Englishmen who were blind from syphilis caught while fucking their mothers, the film version starring either Laurence Harvey or Jeremy Irons, one of those actors you just naturally associated with unnatural acts—

Mike pushed RECORD, the little red eye came on, he said “Orpheus on the Orpheum Circuit!” into the mike, then pushed STOP again. He approached the bed. The coverlet gleamed yellow-orange. The wallpaper, perhaps cream-colored by daylight, had picked up the yellow-orange glow of the coverlet. There was a little night-table to either side of the bed. On one was a telephone—black and large and equipped with a dial. The finger-holes in the dial looked like surprised white eyes. On the other table was a dish with a plum on it. Mike pushed RECORD and said: “That isn’t a real plum. That’s a plastic plum.” He pushed STOP again.

On the bed itself was a doorknob menu. Mike sidled up one side of the bed, being quite careful to touch neither the bed nor the wall, and picked the menu up. He tried not to touch the coverlet, either, but the tips of his fingers brushed it and he moaned. It was soft in some terrible wrong way. Nevertheless, he picked the menu up. It was in French, and although it had been years since he had taken the language, one of the breakfast items appeared to be birds roasted in shit. *That at least sounds like something the French might eat*, he thought, and uttered a wild, distracted laugh.

He closed his eyes and opened them.

The menu was in Russian.

He closed his eyes and opened them.

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The menu was in Italian.

Closed his eyes, opened them.

There *was* no menu. There was a picture of a screaming little woodcut boy looking back over his shoulder at the woodcut wolf which had swallowed his left leg up to the knee. The wolf's ears were laid back and he looked like a terrier with its favorite toy.

I don't see that, Mike thought, and of course he didn't. Without closing his eyes he saw neat lines of English, each line listing a different breakfast temptation. Eggs, waffles, fresh berries; no birds roasted in shit. Still—

He turned around and very slowly edged himself out of the little space between the wall and the bed, a space that now felt as narrow as a grave. His heart was beating so hard that he could feel it in his neck and wrists as well as in his chest. His eyes were throbbing in their sockets. 1408 was wrong, yes indeed, 1408 was *very* wrong. Olin had said something about poison gas, and that was what Mike felt like: someone who has been gassed or forced to smoke strong hashish laced with insect poison. Olin had done this, of course, probably with the active laughing connivance of the security people. Pumped his special poison gas up through the vents. Just because he could *see* no vents didn't mean the vents weren't there.

Mike looked around the bedroom with wide, frightened eyes. There was no plum on the endtable to the left of the bed. No plate, either. The table was bare. He turned, started for the door leading back to the sitting room, and stopped. There was a picture on the wall. He couldn't be absolutely sure—in his present state he couldn't be absolutely sure of his own name—but he was *fairly* sure that there had been no picture there when he first came in. It was a still life. A single plum sat on a tin plate in the middle of an old plank table. The light falling across the plum and the plate was a feverish yellow-orange.

Tango-light, he thought. *The kind of light that makes the dead get up out of their graves and tango. The kind of light—*

"I have to get out of here," he whispered, and blundered back into the sitting room. He became aware that his shoes had begun to make

odd smooching sounds, as if the floor beneath them were growing soft.

The pictures on the living room wall were crooked again, and there were other changes, as well. The lady on the stairs had pulled down the top of her gown, baring her breasts. She held one in each hand. A drop of blood hung from each nipple. She was staring directly into Mike's eyes and grinning ferociously. Her teeth were filed to cannibal points. At the rail of the sailing ship, the tars had been replaced by a line of pallid men and women. The man on the far left, nearest the ship's bow, wore a brown wool suit and held a derby hat in one hand. His hair was slicked to his brow and parted in the middle. His face was shocked and vacant. Mike knew his name: Kevin O'Malley, this room's first occupant, a sewing machine salesman who had jumped from this room in October of 1910. To O'Malley's left were the others who had died here, all with that same vacant, shocked expression. It made them look related, all members of the same inbred and cataclysmically retarded family.

In the picture where the fruit had been, there was now a severed human head. Yellow-orange light swam off the sunken cheeks, the sagging lips, the upturned, glazing eyes, the cigarette parked behind the right ear.

Mike blundered toward the door, his feet smooching and now actually seeming to stick a little at each step. The door wouldn't open, of course. The chain hung unengaged, the thumbbolt stood straight up like clock hands pointing to six o'clock, but the door wouldn't open.

Breathing rapidly, Mike turned from it and waded—that was what it felt like—across the room to the writing desk. He could see the curtains beside the window he had cracked open waving desultorily, but he could feel no fresh air against his face. It was as though the room were swallowing it. He could still hear horns on Fifth, but they were now very distant. Did he still hear the saxophone? If so, the room had stolen its sweetness and melody and left only an atonal reedy drone, like the wind blowing across a hole in a dead man's neck or a pop bottle filled with severed fingers or—

Stop it, he tried to say, but he could no longer speak. His heart was

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hammering at a terrible pace; if it went much faster, it would explode. His minicorder, faithful companion of many “case expeditions,” was no longer in his hand. He had left it somewhere. In the bedroom? If it was in the bedroom, it was probably gone by now, swallowed by the room; when it was digested, it would be excreted into one of the pictures.

Gasping for breath like a runner nearing the end of a long race, Mike put a hand to his chest, as if to soothe his heart. What he felt in the left breast pocket of his gaudy shirt was the small square shape of the minicorder. The feel of it, so solid and known, steadied him a little—brought him back a little. He became aware that he was humming . . . and that the room seemed to be humming back at him, as if myriad mouths were concealed beneath its smoothly nasty wallpaper. He was aware that his stomach was now so nauseated that it seemed to be swinging in its own greasy hammock. He could feel the air crowding against his ears in soft, coagulating clots, and it made him think of how fudge was when it reached the soft-ball stage.

But he was back a little, enough to be positive of one thing: he had to call for help while there was still time. The thought of Olin smirking (in his deferential New York hotel manager way) and saying *I told you so* didn't bother him, and the idea that Olin had somehow induced these strange perceptions and horrible fear by chemical means had entirely left his mind. It was the *room*. It was the god-damned *room*.

He meant to jab out a hand to the old-fashioned telephone—the twin of the one in the bedroom—and snatch it up. Instead he watched his arm descend to the table in a kind of delirious slow motion, so like the arm of a diver he almost expected to see bubbles rising from it.

He closed his fingers around the handset and picked it up. His other hand dove, as deliberate as the first, and dialed 0. As he put the handset of the phone against his ear, he heard a series of clicks as the dial spun back to its original position. It sounded like the wheel on *Wheel of Fortune*, do you want to spin or do you want to solve the puzzle? Remember that if you try to solve the puzzle and fail, you will be

put out into the snow beside the Connecticut Turnpike and the wolves will eat you.

There was no ring in his ear. Instead, a harsh voice simply began speaking. "This is *nine! Nine!* This is *nine! Nine!* This is *ten! Ten!* We have killed your friends! Every friend is now dead! This is *six! Six!*"

Mike listened with growing horror, not at what the voice was saying but at its rasping emptiness. It was not a machine-generated voice, but it wasn't a human voice, either. It was the voice of the room. The presence pouring out of the walls and the floor, the presence speaking to him from the telephone, had nothing in common with any haunting or paranormal event he had ever read about. There was something alien here.

No, not here yet . . . but coming. It's hungry, and you're dinner.

The phone fell from his relaxing fingers and he turned around. It swung at the end of its cord the way his stomach was swinging back and forth inside him, and he could still hear that voice rasping out of the black: "*Eighteen!* This is now *eighteen!* Take cover when the siren sounds! This is *four! Four!*"

He was not aware of taking the cigarette from behind his ear and putting it in his mouth, or of fumbling the book of matches with the old-fashioned gold-frogged doorman on it out of his bright shirt's right breast pocket, not aware that, after nine years, he had finally decided to have a smoke.

Before him, the room had begun to melt.

It was sagging out of its right angles and straight lines, not into curves but into strange Moorish arcs that hurt his eyes. The glass chandelier in the center of the ceiling began to sag like a thick glob of spit. The pictures began to bend, turning into shapes like the windshields of old cars. From behind the glass of the picture by the door leading into the bedroom, the twenties woman with the bleeding nipples and grinning cannibal-teeth whirled around and ran back up the stairs, going with the jerky delirious high knee-pistoning of a vamp in a silent movie. The telephone continued to grind and spit, the voice coming from it now the voice of an electric hair-clipper that has learned how to talk: "*Five!* This is *five!* Ignore the siren! Even if

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you leave this room, you can never leave this room! *Eight!* This is *eight!*”

The door to the bedroom and the door to the hall had begun to collapse downward, widening in the middle and becoming doorways for beings possessed of unhallowed shapes. The light began to grow bright and hot, filling the room with that yellow-orange glow. Now he could see rips in the wallpaper, black pores that quickly grew to become mouths. The floor sank into a concave arc and now he could hear it coming, the dweller in the room behind the room, the thing in the walls, the owner of the buzzing voice. “*Six!*” the phone screamed. “*Six*, this is *six*, this is *goddam fucking SIX!*”

He looked down at the matchbook in his hand, the one he had plucked out of the bedroom ashtray. Funny old doorman, funny old cars with their big chrome grilles . . . and words running across the bottom that he hadn't seen in a long time, because now the strip of abrasive stuff was always on the back.

CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING.

Without thinking about it—he no longer *could* think—Mike Enslin tore out a single match, allowing the cigarette to drop out of his mouth at the same time. He struck the match and immediately touched it to the others in the book. There was a *ffffbut!* sound, a strong whiff of burning sulfur that went into his head like a whiff of smelling salts, and a bright flare of matchheads. And again, without so much as a single thought, Mike held the flaring bouquet of fire against the front of his shirt. It was a cheap thing made in Korea or Cambodia or Borneo, old now; it caught fire at once. Before the flames could blaze up in front of his eyes, rendering the room once more unstable, Mike saw it clearly, like a man who has awakened from a nightmare only to find the nightmare all around him.

His head was clear—the strong whiff of sulfur and the sudden rising heat from his shirt had done that much—but the room maintained its insanely Moorish aspect. *Moorish* was wrong, not even very close, but it was the only word that seemed even to reach toward what had happened here . . . what was still happening. He was in a melting, rotting cave full of swoops and mad tilts. The door to the

bedroom had become the door to some sarcophagal inner chamber. And to his left, where the picture of the fruit had been, the wall was bulging outward toward him, splitting open in those long cracks that gaped like mouths, opening on a world from which *something* was now approaching. Mike Enslin could hear its slobbering, avid breath, and smell something alive and dangerous. It smelled a little like the lion-house in the—

Then flames scorched the undershelf of his chin, banishing thought. The heat rising from his blazing shirt put that waver back into the world, and as he began to smell the crispy aroma of his chest-hair starting to fry, Mike again bolted across the sagging rug to the hall door. An insectile buzzing sound had begun to sweat out of the walls. The yellow-orange light was steadily brightening, as if a hand were turning up an invisible rheostat. But this time when he reached the door and turned the knob, the door opened. It was as if the thing behind the bulging wall had no use for a burning man; did not, perhaps, relish cooked meat.

III

A popular song from the fifties suggests that love makes the world go 'round, but coincidence would probably be a better bet. Rufus Dearborn, who was staying that night in room 1414, up near the elevators, was a salesman for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, in town from Texas to talk about moving up to an executive position. And so it happened that, ninety or so years after room 1408's first occupant jumped to his death, another sewing machine salesman saved the life of the man who had come to write about the purportedly haunted room. Or perhaps that is an exaggeration; Mike Enslin might have lived even if no one—especially a fellow on his way back from a visit to the ice machine—had been in the hallway at that moment. Having your shirt catch fire is no joke, though, and he certainly would have been burned much more severely and extensively if not for Dearborn, who thought fast and moved even faster.

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Not that Dearborn ever remembered exactly what happened. He constructed a coherent enough story for the newspapers and TV cameras (he liked the idea of being a hero very much, and it certainly did no harm to his executive aspirations), and he clearly remembered seeing the man on fire lunge out into the hall, but after that everything was a blur. Thinking about it was like trying to reconstruct the things you had done during the vilest, deepest drunk of your life.

One thing he was sure of but didn't tell any of the reporters, because it made no sense: the burning man's scream seemed to grow in volume, as if he were a stereo that was being turned up. He was right there in front of Dearborn, and the *pitch* of the scream never changed, but the volume most certainly did. It was as if the man were some incredibly loud object that was just arriving here.

Dearborn ran down the hall with the full ice-bucket in his hand. The burning man—"It was just his shirt on fire, I saw that right away," he told the reporters—struck the door opposite the room he had come out of, rebounded, staggered, and fell to his knees. That was when Dearborn reached him. He put his foot on the burning shoulder of the screaming man's shirt and pushed him over onto the hall carpet. Then he dumped the contents of the ice-bucket onto him.

These things were blurred in his memory, but accessible. He was aware that the burning shirt seemed to be casting far too much light—a sweltering yellow-orange light that made him think of a trip he and his brother had made to Australia two years before. They had rented an all-wheel drive and had taken off across the Great Australian Desert (the few natives called it the Great Australian Bugger-All, the Dearborn brothers discovered), a hell of a trip, great, but spooky. Especially the big rock in the middle, Ayers Rock. They had reached it right around sunset and the light on its man faces was like this . . . hot and strange . . . not really what you thought of as earth-light at all . . .

He dropped beside the burning man who was now only the smoldering man, the covered-with-ice-cubes man, and rolled him over to stifle the flames reaching around to the back of the shirt. When he did, he saw the skin on the left side of the man's neck had gone a

smoky, bubbly red, and the lobe of his ear on that side had melted a little, but otherwise . . . otherwise . . .

Dearborn looked up, and it seemed—this was crazy, but it seemed the door to the room the man had come out of was filled with the burning light of an Australian sundown, the hot light of an empty place where things no man had ever seen might live. It was terrible, that light (and the low buzzing, like an electric clipper that was trying desperately to speak), but it was fascinating, too. He wanted to go into it. He wanted to see what was behind it.

Perhaps Mike saved Dearborn's life, as well. He was certainly aware that Dearborn was getting up—as if Mike no longer held any interest for him—and that his face was filled with the blazing, pulsing light coming out of 1408. He remembered this better than Dearborn later did himself, but of course Rufe Dearborn had not been reduced to setting himself on fire in order to survive.

Mike grabbed the cuff of Dearborn's slacks. "Don't go in there," he said in a cracked, smoky voice. "You'll never come out."

Dearborn stopped, looking down at the reddening, blistering face of the man on the carpet.

"*It's haunted,*" Mike said, and as if the words had been a talisman, the door of room 1408 slammed furiously shut, cutting off the light, cutting off the terrible buzz that was almost words.

Rufus Dearborn, one of Singer Sewing Machine's finest, ran down to the elevators and pulled the fire alarm.

IV

There's an interesting picture of Mike Enslin in *Treating the Burn Victim: A Diagnostic Approach*, the sixteenth edition of which appeared about sixteen months after Mike's short stay in room 1408 of the Hotel Dolphin. The photo shows just his torso, but it's Mike, all right. One can tell by the white square on the left side of his chest. The flesh all around it is an angry red, actually blistered into second-degree burns in some places. The white square marks the left breast pocket

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of the shirt he was wearing that night, the lucky shirt with his minicorder in the pocket.

The minicorder itself melted around the corners, but it still works, and the tape inside it was fine. It's the things on it which are not fine. After listening to it three or four times, Mike's agent, Sam Farrell, tossed it into his wall-safe, refusing to acknowledge the gooseflesh all over his tanned, scrawny arms. In that wall-safe the tape has stayed ever since. Farrell has no urge to take it out and play it again, not for himself, not for his curious friends, some of whom would cheerfully kill to hear it; New York publishing is a small community, and word gets around.

He doesn't like Mike's voice on the tape, he doesn't like the stuff that voice is saying (*My brother was actually eaten by wolves one winter on the Connecticut Turnpike . . . what in God's name is that supposed to mean?*), and most of all he doesn't like the background sounds on the tape, a kind of liquid smooshing that sometimes sounds like clothes churning around in an oversudsed washer, sometimes like one of those old electric hair-clippers . . . and sometimes weirdly like a voice.

While Mike was still in the hospital, a man named Olin—the manager of the goddamned hotel, if you please—came and asked Sam Farrell if he could listen to that tape. Farrell said no, he couldn't; what Olin could do was take himself on out of the agent's office at a rapid hike and thank God all the way back to the fleabag where he worked that Mike Enslin had decided not to sue either the hotel or Olin for negligence.

"I tried to persuade him not to go in," Olin said quietly. A man who spent most of his working days listening to tired travellers and petulant guests bitch about everything from their rooms to the magazine selection in the newsstand, he wasn't much perturbed by Farrell's rancor. "I tried everything in my power. If anyone was negligent that night, Mr. Farrell, it was your client. He believed too much in nothing. Very unwise behavior. Very *unsafe* behavior. I would guess he has changed somewhat in that regard."

In spite of Farrell's distaste for the tape, he would like Mike to listen to it, acknowledge it, perhaps use it as a pad from which to launch

a new book. There is a book in what happened to Mike, Farrell knows it—not just a chapter, a forty-page case history, but an entire book. One that might outsell all three of the *Ten Nights* books combined. And of course he doesn't believe Mike's assertion that he has finished not only with ghost-tales but with all writing. Writers say that from time to time, that's all. The occasional prima donna outburst is part of what makes writers in the first place.

As for Mike Enslin himself, he got off lucky, all things considered. And he knows it. He could have been burned much more badly than he actually was; if not for Mr. Dearborn and his bucket of ice, he might have had twenty or even thirty different skin-graft procedures to suffer through instead of only four. His neck is scarred on the left side in spite of the grafts, but the doctors at the Boston Burn Institute tell him the scars will fade on their own. He also knows that the burns, painful as they were in the weeks and months after that night, were necessary. If not for the matches with CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING written on the front, he would have died in 1408, and his end would have been unspeakable. To a coroner it might have looked like a stroke or a heart attack, but the actual cause of death would have been much nastier.

Much nastier.

He was also lucky in having produced three popular books on ghosts and hauntings before actually running afoul of a place that *is* haunted—this he also knows. Sam Farrell may not believe Mike's life as a writer is over, but Sam doesn't need to; Mike knows it for both of them. He cannot so much as write a postcard without feeling cold all over his skin and being nauseated deep in the pit of his belly. Sometimes just looking at a pen (or a tape recorder) will make him think: *The pictures were crooked. I tried to straighten the pictures.* He doesn't know what this means. He can't remember the pictures or anything else from room 1408, and he is glad. That is a mercy. His blood-pressure isn't so good these days (his doctor told him that burn victims often develop problems with their blood-pressure and put him on medication), his eyes trouble him (his ophthalmologist told him to start taking Ocuvides), he has consistent back problems, his prostate has

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gotten too large . . . but he can deal with these things. He knows he isn't the first person to escape 1408 without really escaping—Olin tried to tell him—but it isn't all bad. At least he doesn't remember. Sometimes he has nightmares, quite often, in fact (almost every goddam *night*, in fact), but he rarely remembers them when he wakes up. A sense that things are rounding off at the corners, mostly—melting the way the corners of his minicorder melted. He lives on Long Island these days, and when the weather is good he takes long walks on the beach. The closest he has ever come to articulating what he does remember about his seventy-odd (*very* odd) minutes in 1408 was on one of those walks. "It was never human," he told the incoming waves in a choked, halting voice. "Ghosts . . . at least ghosts were once human. The thing in the wall, though . . . that thing . . ."

Time may improve it, he can and does hope for that. Time may fade it, as it will fade the scars on his neck. In the meantime, though, he sleeps with the lights on in his bedroom, so he will know at once where he is when he wakes up from the bad dreams. He has had all the phones taken out of the house; at some point just below the place where his conscious mind seems able to go, he is afraid of picking the phone up and hearing a buzzing, inhuman voice spit, "This is *nine!* *Nine!* We have killed your friends! Every friend is now dead!"

And when the sun goes down on clear evenings, he pulls every shade and blind and drape in the house. He sits like a man in a dark-room until his watch tells him the light—even the last fading glow along the horizon—must be gone.

He can't stand the light that comes at sunset.

That yellow deepening to orange, like light in the Australian desert.

