

1408

by Stephen King

1

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.

1

"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 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 1919-- 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. *My 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 hat. 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 humidior. 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, 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 the 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 bestsellers, all--just yet. He simply shuffled through them a third time. The mellow lamplight reflected off their shiny 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 been on the defensive ever since he'd taken out the minicorder (which actually was 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 the 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 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 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 nay 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.