

1408

IV

The fear had finally settled in upon Mike Enslin, so he worked to control it. 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 Chrysler New Yorkers with fins.

"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. The window was open. "Success!" Mike repeated, picking the minicorder up off the desk. "How the hell? The metal grating is gone What is it with this room? 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"— suddenly there's a smashing sound and the listener immediately knows that the window has slammed down on Enslin's hand.

Mike turned on his heels and lurched to the bathroom sink. He pulled the handle of the sink to clean the blood and his next set of screams indicate the heat of the scalding water that gushed out on to his injury.

He pushed RECORD and spoke two words – “ damn blood” - into the minicorder. Then he turned it off again and walked across the room to the door leading into the bedroom. “Into bed,” he said. “Rest a moment.”

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 figures buried in

hanging glass baubles. The bed was a double hiding under a yellow-orange coverlet.

"Why say hiding?" Mike asked himself (or the minicorder), then pushed the STOP button again. He stepped in, fascinated by the fuming desert of the coverlet, by the tumor-like bulges of the pillows beneath it. "Sleep there? No!" he grunted. "Get the hell out."

He saw the house phone next to the bed and picked it up.

"Front Desk!"

"This is the Front desk. May I help you."

"This is 1408. I wanna leave!"

"I'm sorry Mr. Enslin. No one leaves Room 1408."

"Send up Olin now!" he shouted, and slammed the phone.

He groped back toward the bed. 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 and terrible in some 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. The menu was in Italian. Closed his eyes, opened them. There was no menu.

What's happening to me?

Back at the window, Mike saw a man sitting in what appeared to be a living room in a building across the way. *Is he watching TV?* He peered out the window. Then he called out the window. "Hey!" The man looked back. *Who the hell is that?* The man was him! *I don't see that,* Mike thought, and of course he didn't. The room did.

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 eat something 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. "I have to get out of here," he whispered, and blundered back into the sitting room. Opening the window, he dared to crawl out on the ledge, intending to shuffle along to the window of the next room, where he could climb in.

He crept out, repelled by the 14 story fall yawning before him. The wind was chill, and the street noises loud as he slipped along the narrow ledge. *I can make it! Even if I fall, I...*

There was no window there! Now he could see the nothingness. Just an endless wall with its endless ledge and that all too brief fall to hard pavement. Crawling back to the window, Mike sensed the rush of a body flying out the window, past him, and down to the street below. *The ghost of one of the victims Olin told me about?* Mike thought. No time to think. He hurled himself into the room and onto the floor.

Try the door again, Enslin thought - hopelessly.

He padded across the room, gradually becoming aware that his shoes were making 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.

I'll never reach the door!

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 now, his feet smooching and seeming to stick a little at each step. The door wouldn't open, of course. The chain hung unengaged, the lock bolt stood straight up like a clock hand 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 so 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 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 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. A harsh voice simply began speaking. "This is five! Five! Your daughter has died. This is nine! Nine! Your wife is gone. This is ten! Ten! We have killed your friends! 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 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.

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 fffffhut! 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.

He was in a melting, rotting cave full of swoops and mad tilts. The door to the bedroom had become the door to some tomb's 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 smells a little like* - 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; as if Room 1408 did not, perhaps, enjoy cooked meat.

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Mike Enslin later swore that he had spent a great deal of time in Room 1408 – an assertion contradicted by everyone who saw Enslin that evening. Seventy minutes...just seventy minutes insisted not only Olin, but the desk clerk, the valet, and the house keeper who caught a glimpse of both Olin and Enslin slipping into the elevator on their way up to that forbidden room.

But Mike insisted otherwise. He insisted that he had seen his estranged wife and dead daughter in an old video playing (*impossibly*) on the television set in Room 1408. He remembered it all. Everyone knew that the girl had died and the marriage had ended, but Mike insisted that he had been

with them in the gruesome hours they had spent in the hospital, awaiting the girl's untimely but inevitable death. Mike recalled with perfect clarity the lies he and his wife told her about how she would get better. He remembered how the marriage had ended in bitter recriminations about what they should have done to save the girl. He remembered how the precious girl had come to him in Room 1408, asking whether he still loved her. And he remembered how she crumbled into nothingness before him just as he reached out to embrace her.

None of these memories meant anything to anyone but Mike. What everyone aside from Mike Enslin remembered was the fire – the terrible fire – and the smell of burning flesh.

Olin's memories are far more precise than anyone else's. Olin remembers the incredible coincidence of the sewing machine salesman. It seems that a certain 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.

Not that Dearborn ever remembered exactly what happened. Dearborn needed the help of the firemen who saw the incredible event from thirty feet away. They helped him clarify his account of things. 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 earthlight 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 as the lives of the arriving firefighters. 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 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.

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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 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. Mike and his former wife listened to it once. They swear that they heard their daughter's voice on the tape. After listening to it three or four times, Mike's agent, Sam Farrell, claimed that they were wrong. He then 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 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 over-sudsed 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.

But Olin knew he was safe from any lawsuit. "I tried to persuade him not to go in," Olin said quietly. A man who spent most of his working days listening to tired travelers 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."

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It all seems so long ago. 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 Enslin; 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 "I've had it with writing!" 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 Ocuvites), he has consistent back problems, his prostate has 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 his former wife, who can't resist hearing stories about their dear daughter, spends more and more time with him. When the weather is good they take long walks on the beach, remembering the girl. The closest he has ever come to articulating what he does remember about his seventy-odd minutes in 1408 was on one of those walks. "The room was never human," he told her and the incoming waves in a choked, halting voice. "Our girl was a ghost. Maybe. But she was ours. At least ghosts were once human. The thing in the wall, though...that thing.."

Time may improve his spirit; he can and does hope for that. Time may fade the horror, 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 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 darkroom 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 some terrible death-light in the baking hot Australian desert.