

1408



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 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 cellphones. 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 click 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 way 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 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.

"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 Romandean 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, 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, 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 the time, and he saw the death certificate. The power of whatever inhabits that 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 campfire 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 "Sunday 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 the 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 statues (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 traveling 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 this office - maybe it's some vibe that comes up from the Persian rug-he loses it out here. Competency, yes, you could see that when he was signing the maitre 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 carefully 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.

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.