

1408



"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.

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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 the 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 it 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 tap, you can hear the 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 towards 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 and 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 hook, line, and sinker!'

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 over head 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 growing 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 cruise ship – the QE 2. He had been told that if one persevered through that period of increased susceptibility, one usually adapted... "got your sea legs," some of the old hands still said. Mike hadn't done enough sailing to get his sea legs, 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 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-jebrows," 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...