



AN EVENING'S

Entertainment

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Richard knew me immediately. It was one of those sunny days in early June and I was wandering back to the office, looking at things in store windows, distracted by the noon crowd. I didn't even have time to prepare myself before he was grabbing my hand and drew me close in a hug. The sudden warmth of his greeting and the impact of his flesh shocked me. I could almost believe we'd actually meant something to each other all those years ago. But when I turned my thoughts back, the only image that came to mind was of a sweaty, piggish youth who wasn't very smart and who annoyed people with his silly jokes.

It had been at least fifteen years since we'd last seen each other. I knew I looked pretty much the same, but he'd changed so much I barely recognized him. His hair had thinned to sparse grey wisps, his face had grown broad and flat, and his fingers seemed fleshy and swollen, the nails chewed to ragged stubs. An accumulation of stress had carved lines and crevices into the pale skin around his eyes.

The last thing I wanted was to hear about his problems. But I didn't want to be rude either, and somehow, as I smiled and nodded and shared in his stories, I left the impression that I'd enjoy more of his company. In order to get away I had to agree to meet him later that evening, at an expensive restaurant I'd never tried but which he seemed to think I'd approve of. For some reason this arrangement made him very happy.

All afternoon I toyed with the idea of not going. I was certain he'd never find me. I'd said almost nothing about

myself, and my phone number isn't in the book. But in the end I decided it is possible to dislike someone like Richard and still be amused by him, and I knew I could shake him off if he became a nuisance. I also have to confess I was curious. The first thing I'd noticed was the shabby condition of his clothes and how his whole body seemed threadbare, top to bottom. I was sure he wanted something.

I found him in the bar with a gin and tonic, and he insisted that I order a drink too. We had a few more minutes to wait before our table would be ready, and while we sat there he told me he'd been invited to join a prestigious accounting firm and that his investments were riding an upward spiral that never seemed to end. Tonight, he declared in a voice that was louder than necessary as he raised his drink in the air, was a time to celebrate. He leaned back and scanned the room with a satisfied grin. I offered my congratulations but added nothing further. One glance at his suit confirmed my initial suspicion that his finances were in a ruinous state. His shoes had evidently suffered a number of years of heavy wear, and he spoke with the phoney bravura of someone who's endured one setback after another. I'd remembered earlier that in school he'd treated the rest of us with a snobbish disdain and that he'd always seemed convinced of a certain innate superiority, though we all knew his family was no better than anyone else's.

I smiled into my scotch.

At our table I suggested we order dinner immediately, but Richard wanted another drink. There was no question

that he'd been drinking quite freely since I'd seen him at noon. I hadn't noticed before, but I saw now that his movements were clumsy, his whole manner droopy and sluggish. When he tried to accuse me of plotting to spoil his big night out, he stammered drunkenly at the last moment and the insult fell flat. I smiled as he glanced up at me in silent outrage, and I watched as his contempt for me revealed itself in the momentary narrowing of his tiny eyes. I drained my scotch and quickly ordered another.

With his drink firmly in his fist he leaned back and grunted, "So, tell me about yourself."

"There's not much to tell, really," I said. "I went to college like everyone else. I found a job. I earned some money." I shrugged. "Here I am."

"What did you take in college?"

"Everything," I answered without hesitation, knowing how much this sort of response would annoy him.

"What does that mean?" he asked after a brief pause, his question a staccato attack. "Everything."

"Arts, science. Just about everything in between. You name it, I took it."

"What are you up to now?" he asked. "Where do you work?"

I told him I played professional baseball.

He hesitated a few seconds before responding. But I could tell, as his face struggled to find the proper expression, that he had come very close to believing me.

"You're lying," he said. He followed up this declaration with a derisive snort.

I shrugged and told him he could believe whatever he wanted.

"You always were a piss-artist," he growled. "None of us liked you. We all thought you were weird."

I asked him who he was referring to with that mysterious "we."

"There was a bunch of us," he said, a smug grin distorting his heavy features. "We wouldn't let you join our club. Remember?"

The truth was I couldn't remember anything about trying to join a club. I suggested maybe he had me confused with someone else.

"No way," he said, shaking his head, smirking as if he'd scored some sort of triumph. "No goddamn way."

We sat for a long moment in silence.

"What about your sister?" he began at last, resuming his efforts to appear cordial. "What's she been up to?"

I told him she was dead.

"My God!" he blurted, genuinely shocked. "Really?"

"No," I said. "Not really."

His eyes narrowed again until he looked so flustered I had to suppress an impulse to laugh.

"What about your parents?" he inquired with a scornful sneer. "Didn't your father scrounge garbage or something?"

I said that his memory was very good and added that my father was blind and nearly eighty and still scrounging garbage.

"Don't bullshit me," he muttered a bit too loudly. Some of his drink dribbled down his chin but he didn't seem to notice.

I shrugged and repeated that he could believe whatever he

wanted. I wasn't about to try to change his mind.

During the silence that followed he stared at me and seemed to grope for a response. After a minute or so I began to think he hadn't heard or perhaps not understood what I'd said. I almost leaned over to ask if he was feeling all right.

"But. . . don't you think we owe each other something?" he began, unsure of himself but desperate to keep things going. "Here we are . . . and you know, it's almost fifteen years since . . . well." He shook his head as the years drifted past before his eyes. "Christ, we were kids the last time we saw each other. Do you remember what it was like? Spending all those years in school together? Going to school every day? It's got to mean something doesn't it? It's still got to be here for us. What we had. You remember don't you? That connection between us? We could be friends again. Like in the old days."

This speech seemed to take quite a bit out of him. He sighed as if defeated and suddenly appeared very tired.

I said I couldn't even begin to imagine what he thought I owed him. It couldn't be respect, since he'd never done anything to deserve it. As far as I was concerned any connection between us had been severed long ago.

He just stared at me. Something dreamy and vacant in his eyes told me that he had no idea what I was talking about.

I went on to explain that a long time ago I'd discovered that nothing in my own past was of any use to me, considering the life I'd chosen to lead. And for this reason I pretended that large parts of it had never happened. The boy of fifteen is always an embarrassment to a man of thirty. So in purely practical terms, why would I seek out people who could bring that boy back?

I could see I was wasting my breath.

After a few seconds of what appeared to be sober reflection he said, "I don't understand you." He shook his big head, totally at a loss. "You were strange back then, but you're even stranger now. Those were the best years of my life, and you're crapping on them."

I told him I could easily believe he'd been better off then, considering his appearance today.

"Why don't you shut up!" he snapped.

What amazed me more than anything was that he seemed to sincerely want to know about me. This struck me as odd because nothing he said about himself interested me in the least.

"You were always so sure of yourself, weren't you," he muttered. "Jesus, nothing made any difference to you." He gestured gracelessly, as if to emphasize some point. "Even when Janet Evoy got killed in that car accident you didn't care. You were the only one who didn't come to the funeral."

I told him again that his memory was better than mine. I couldn't remember anyone named Janet Evoy who got killed in a car accident.

"You wouldn't," he spat, clearly consumed by his dislike of me.

I'd had enough of this. I asked him why he'd invited me here and what he wanted.

"What?"

His pasty complexion paled even further and his eyes flashed with alarm.

I told him not to waste any more of my time. It was evi-

dent from his appearance (I cautioned him not to deny it) that he'd accosted me for one reason, and one reason only, and that he had no more desire to relive the past than I did. I said in a few minutes I was going to leave, but I was willing to give him something if he spoke up now.

I waited for him to respond.

He seemed all at once to crumple into himself, like a collapsible toy. As his face lengthened he seemed in miraculous fashion to grow old beyond his years. He abandoned his false confidence like an outer skin.

"First," he murmured, avoiding my eyes, "get me another drink."

"Say 'please'."

He glanced up wearily. I'd noticed to this point a faded glimmer in his eye, proof, it seemed to me, that he was still among the living and driven by greed or by the survival instinct or by rage at his bad luck or by hatred of all mankind. Something. But even that was gone now. More than anything else, he seemed to be in pain. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Please," he stated evenly, "get me another drink."

I gestured to the waiter.

With his drink in his hand he began telling the truth.

"You wouldn't remember, but my parents ran a contracting company. My father was a tradesman — a carpenter — who'd worked his way up from nothing. I . . . I don't know how it all happened, but everything was going great until a few years ago. Then all of a sudden people weren't being paid for the work they did and jobs weren't being finished. We were being sued out of business. I sort of felt like I should do something, but I didn't know what. My father never let anyone look at the books. I guess it should have bothered me. But it didn't. We had this big house and all this stuff. We took trips everywhere and we had a yacht, and expensive cars, but none of us ever saw any money. My father controlled it all.

"Anyway, we woke up one morning about a year ago and my father was gone. All the bank accounts were empty. We had to sell everything just to pay off the lawyers. I never went to college. I thought I was going to be working for the company all my life. I was satisfied with that. You know? But the only work I can get now pays minimum wage.

"Kathy — you probably don't remember Kathy Keelor from school; anyway, we'd been married almost ten years — Kathy left me. I just finished with the divorce. I signed the papers this morning. It cleaned me out. I was wondering if I was going to be able to get anything to eat today when I saw you coming. I didn't care any more. I had to do something quick. I grabbed your hand and shook it as hard as I could. I didn't know what else to do."

He rubbed a hand over his face, back and forth, and I remembered how in school he would do this when being taunted and preparing to cry.

I sat there for a few moments and then told him he could have three hundred dollars, more or less. That was the amount of cash I had on hand.

"What?"

"But in exchange for one thing."

His eyes narrowed again.

"What's that?" he said.

"I want you to yell at me as loud as you can that you hate me and never want to see me again."

"I . . . I can't do that!" he stammered, glancing around timidly. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Not here. With all these people . . ."

It was either that or no money. I'd pay the bar bill, but that was all.

He slumped over the table, leaning his heavy head on his arms. The very top of his scalp was bald, pathetic, vulnerable.

"Oh, God! I can't. . ."

It wouldn't be all that difficult, I said somewhat pointedly. It was the truth after all.

He squirmed in his seat. His lack of nerve sickened me. Did he really believe he could decline my offer on principle? What did he think he had to bargain with?

He emitted a low moan, barely audible. I realized then that the only way he'd do what I wanted was if I got him angry again.

I reminded him that there was nothing wrong with speaking the truth. In this case he'd even be rewarded for it. All he had to do was show a little courage.

He levelled a scornful glance at me.

"You prick," he said, hardly opening his mouth.

I asked if it were in fact true, that he hated me and never wanted to see me again. When he didn't say anything I pointed out that that was exactly how I felt about him. I'd always felt that way about him.

We stared at each other in silence for a few moments longer.

I stood. And then, resting my glass firmly on the table, I announced that I wasn't going to waste any more time with him and that I'd pay for his drinks on my way out.

I was walking away when I heard him call me.

"Wait!"

I turned to face him and from ten feet away witnessed the writhing torment of an ignorant but civilized man resisting his best instincts. I noticed that other people at their tables had turned to watch.

He stood. He must have finally recognized the futility of his predicament because his struggle only lasted a few seconds.

"I hate you!" he roared, injecting his words with the heated resonance of a heartfelt conviction. "I never want to see you again!"

He seemed to sway momentarily on his feet, and then toppled backward into his chair, like a man suddenly taken ill. There was a tremendous thud.

I retraced my steps and tossed the money on the table. Some of the bills came unfurled and fluttered over the edge to the floor. Without a glance in my direction he stooped to retrieve them.

People followed me with their eyes as I left. I could sense their gratitude at having had their evening enlivened with this performance. Some even looked straight at me and I couldn't help but smile back. It was an exquisite sensation. Worth much more than three hundred dollars.

