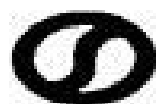


THINNER

STEPHEN KING

Writing as Richard Bachman



A SIGNET BOOK

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Curse of the Old Gypsy Man ...

THINNER

Billy Halleck, good husband, loving father, is both beneficiary and victim of the American Good Life. He has an expensive home, a nice family, and a rewarding career as a lawyer. But he is also fifty pounds overweight and, as his doctor keeps reminding him, heading into heart attack country.

Then, in a moment of carelessness, Billy sideswipes an old gypsy woman as she is crossing the street—and her ancient father passes a bizarre and terrible judgment on him.

“Thinner,” the old gypsy man whispers, and caresses his cheeks like a lover. Just one word ... but six weeks later and ninety-three pounds lighter, Billy Halleck is more than worried. He’s terrified. And desperate enough for one last gamble ... that will lead him to a nightmare showdown with the forces of evil melting his flesh away.

“Pulsating with evil ... will have you on the edge of your seat.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

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CHAPTER 1: 246

“Thinner,” the old Gypsy man with the rotting nose whispers to William Halleck as Halleck and his wife, Heidi, come out of the courthouse. Just that one word, sent on the wafting, cloying sweetness of his breath. “Thinner.” And before Halleck can jerk away, the old Gypsy reaches out and caresses his cheek with one twisted finger. His lips spread open like a wound, showing a few tombstone stumps poking out of his gums. They are black and green. His tongue squirms between them and then slides out to slick his grinning, bitter lips.

Thinner.

This memory came back to Billy Halleck, fittingly enough, as he stood on the scales at seven in the morning with a towel wrapped around his middle. The good smells of bacon and eggs came up from downstairs. He had to crane forward slightly to read the numbers on the scale. Well ... actually, he had to crane forward more than slightly. Actually he had to crane forward quite a lot. He was a big man. Too big, as Dr. Houston delighted in telling him. *In case no one ever told you, let me pass you this information, Houston had told him after his last checkup. A man of your age, income, and habits enters heart-attack country at roughly age thirty-eight, Billy. You ought to take off some weight.*

But this morning there was good news. He was down three pounds, from 249 to 246.

Well . . . the scale had actually read 251 the last time he'd had the courage to stand on it and take a good look, but he'd had his pants on, and there had been some change in his pockets, not to mention his keyring and his Swiss army knife. And the upstairs bathroom scale weighed heavy. He was moral sure of it.

As a kid growing up in New York he'd heard Gypsies had the gift of prophecy. Maybe this was the proof. He tried to laugh and could only raise a small and not very successful smile; it was still too early to laugh about Gypsies. Time would pass and things would come into perspective; he was old enough to know that. But for now he still felt sick to his too-large stomach at the thought of Gypsies and hoped heartily he would never see another in his life. From now on he would pass on the palm-reading at parties and stick to the Ouija board. If that.

“Billy?” From downstairs.

“Coming!”

He dressed, noting with an almost subliminal distress that in spite of the three-pound drop the waist of his pants was getting tight again. His waist size was forty-two now. He had quit smoking at exactly 12:01 on New Year's Day, but he had paid. Oh, boy, had he paid. He went downstairs with his collar open and his tie lying around his neck. Linda, his fourteen-year-old daughter, was just going out the door in a flirt of skirt and a flip of her ponytail, tied this morning with a sexy velvet ribbon. Her books were under one arm. Two gaudy cheerleader's pom-poms, purple and white, rustled busily in her other hand.

“ 'Bye, Dad!”

“Have a good day, Lin.”

He sat down at the table, grabbed *The Wall Street Journal*.

“Lover,” Heidi said.

“My dear,” he said grandly, and turned *the Journal* facedown beside the lazy Susan.

She put breakfast in front of him: a steaming mound of scrambled eggs, an English muffin with raisins, five strips of crisp country-style bacon. Good eats. She slipped into the seat opposite him in the breakfast nook and lit a Vantage 100. January and February had been tense—too many “discussions” that were only disguised arguments, too many nights they had finished sleeping back to back. But they had reached a *modus vivendi*: she had stopped dunning him about his weight and he had stopped yapping at her about her pack-and-a-half-a-day butt habit. It had made for a decent-enough spring. And beyond their own private balance, other good things had happened. Halleck had been promoted, for one. Greely, Penschley, and Kinder was now Greely, Penschley, Kinder, and Halleck. Heidi’s mother had finally made good on her long-standing threat to move back to Virginia. Linda had at last made J. V. cheerleaders and to Billy this was a great blessing; there had been times when he had been sure Lin’s histrionics would drive him into a nervous breakdown. Everything had been going just great.

Then the Gypsies had come to town.

“Thinner,” the old Gypsy man had said, and what the hell was it with his nose? Syphilis? Cancer? Or something even more terrible, like leprosy? And by the way, why can’t you just quit it? Why can’t you just let it alone?

“You can’t get it off your mind, can you?” Heidi said suddenly—so suddenly that Halleck started sliding out of his seat. *“Billy, it was not your fault. The judge said so.”*

“I wasn’t thinking about that.”

“Then what were you thinking about?”

“The *Journal*,” he said. “It says housing starts are down again this quarter.”

Not his fault, right; the judge had said so. Judge Rossington. Cary, to his friends.

Friends like me, Halleck thought. Played many a round of golf with old Cary Rossington, Heidi, and you well know. At our New Year’s Eve party two years ago, the year I thought about giving up smoking and didn’t do it, who grabbed your oh-so-grabbable tit during the traditional happy-new-year kiss? Guess who? Why, my stars! It was good old Cary Rossington, as I live and breathe!

Yes. Good old Cary Rossington, before whom Billy had argued more than a dozen municipal cases. Good old Cary Rossington with whom Billy sometimes played poker down at the club. Good old Cary Rossington who hadn’t disqualified himself when his good old golfing-and-poker buddy Billy Halleck (Cary would sometimes clap him on the back and yell, “How they hangin’, Big Bill?”) came before him in court, not to argue some point of municipal law, but on a charge of vehicular manslaughter.

And when Cary Rossington did not disqualify himself, who said boo, children? Who in this who’s-who fair town of Fairview was the boo-sayer? Why, nobody, that’s who! Nobody said boo! After all, who were they? Nothing but a bunch of filthy Gypsies. The sooner they were out of Fairview and headed up the road in their old station wagons with the NRA stickers on the back bumpers, the sooner we saw the rear ends of their home-carpentered trailers and camper caps, the better. The sooner they—
—*thinner.*

Heidi snuffed her cigarette and said, “Shit on your housing starts. I know you better.”

Billy supposed so. And he supposed she had been thinking about it, too. Her face was too pale. She looked her age—thirty-five—and that was rare. They had married very, very young, and he still remembered the traveling salesman who had come to the door selling vacuum cleaners one day after they had been married three years. He had looked at the twenty-two-year-old Heidi Halleck and had asked politely, “Is your mother home, hon?”

“Not hurting my appetite any,” he said, and that was certainly true. Angst or no angst, he had laid waste to the scrambled eggs. and of the bacon there was now no sign. He drank half his orange juice.

and gave her a big old Billy Halleck grin. She tried to smile back and it didn't quite happen. He imagined her wearing a sign: ~~MY SMILER IS TEMPORARILY OUT OF ORDER.~~

He reached across the table and took her hand. "Heidi, it's all right. And even if it's not, it's all over."

"I know it is. I know."

"Is Linda—?"

"No. Not anymore. She says ... she says her girlfriends are being very supportive."

For about a week after it had happened, their daughter had had a bad time of it. She had come home from school either in tears or close to them. She had stopped eating. Her complexion had flared up. Halleck, determined not to overreact, had gone in to see her home-room teacher, the assistant principal, and Linda's beloved Miss Nearing, who taught phys ed and cheerleading. He ascertained (ah, there was a good lawyerly word) that it was teasing, mostly—as rough and unfunny as most junior-high-school teasing is apt to be, and tasteless to be sure, considering the circumstances, but what could you expect of an age group that thought dead-baby jokes were the height of wit?

He had gotten Linda to take a walk with him up the street. Lantern Drive was lined with tasteful suburban back-from-the-road homes, homes which began at roughly \$75,000 and worked up into the \$200,000 indoor-pool-and-sauna range by the time you got to the country-club end of the street.

Linda had been wearing her old madras shorts, which were now torn along one seam . . . and Halleck observed, her legs had now grown so long and coltish that the leg bands of her yellow cotton panties showed. He felt a pang of mingled regret and terror. She was growing up. He supposed she knew the old madras shorts were too small, worn out in the bargain, but he guessed she had put them on because they made a link with a more comforting childhood, a childhood where daddies did not have to go to court and stand trial (no matter how cut-and-dried that trial might be, with your old good buddy and that drunken grabber of your wife's tit, Cary Rossington, driving the gavel), a childhood where kids did not rush up to you on the soccer field during period four while you were eating your lunch to ask you how many points your dad had gotten for bagging the old lady.

You understand it was an accident, don't you, Linda?

She nods, not looking at him. Yes, Daddy.

She came out between two cars without looking either way. There was no time for me to stop. Absolutely no time.

Daddy, I don't want to hear about it.

I know you don't. And I don't want to talk about it. But you are hearing about it. At school.

She looks at him feefully. Daddy! You didn't—

Go to your school? Yeah. I did. But not until three-thirty yesterday afternoon. There were no kids there at all, at least that I could see. No one's going to know.

She relaxes. A little.

I heard you've been getting some pretty rough handling from the other kids. I'm sorry about that.

It hasn't been so bad, she says, taking his hand. Her face—the fresh scatter of angry-looking pimples on her forehead—tells a different story. The pimples say the handling has been rough indeed. Having a parent arrested is not a situation even Judy Blume covers (although someday she probably will).

I also hear you've been handling it pretty well, Billy Halleck says. Not making a big thing out of it. Because if they ever see they're getting under your skin . . .

Yeah, I know, she says glumly.

~~Miss Nearing said she was especially proud of you, he says. It's a small lie. Miss Nearing hadn't~~
said precisely that, but she had certainly spoken well of Linda, and that meant almost as much
Halleck as it did to his daughter. And it does the job. Her eyes brighten and she looks at Halleck for
the first time.

She did?

She did, Halleck confirms. The lie comes easily and convincingly. Why not? He has told a lot of lies
just lately.

She squeezes his hand and smiles at him gratefully.

They'll let it go pretty soon, Lin. They'll find some other bone to chew. Some girl will get pregnant
or a teacher will have a nervous breakdown or some boy will get busted for selling pot or cocaine. And
you'll be off the hook. Get it?

She throws her arms around him suddenly and hugs him tight. He decides she isn't growing up so
fast after all, and that not all lies are bad. I love you, Daddy, she says.

I love you too, Lin.

He hugs her back and suddenly someone turns on a big stereo amplifier in the front of his brain and
he hears the double-thud again: the first as the Ninety-Eight's front bumper strikes the old Gypsy
woman with the bright red cloth kerchief over her scraggly hair, the second as the big front wheels
pass over her body.

Heidi screams.

And her hand leaves Halleck's lap.

Halleck hugs his daughter tighter, feeling goose flesh break all over his body.

"More eggs?" Heidi asked, breaking into his reverie.

"No. No, thanks." He looked at his clean plate with some guilt: no matter how bad things got, the
had never gotten bad enough to cause him to lose either sleep or his appetite.

"Are you sure you're ... ?"

"Okay?" He smiled. "I'm okay, you're okay, Linda's okay. As they say on the soap operas, the
nightmare is over—can we please get back to our lives?"

"That's a lovely idea." This time she returned his smile with a real one of her own—she was
suddenly under thirty again, and radiant. "Want the rest of the bacon? There's two slices left."

"No," he said, thinking of the way his pants nipped at his soft waist (*what waist, ha-ha?* a small and
unfunny Don Rickles spoke up in his mind—the last time you had a waist was around 1978, you
hockey puck), the way he had to suck in his gut to hook the catch. Then he thought of the scale and
said, "I'll have one of them. I've lost three pounds."

She had gone to the stove in spite of his original no—*sometimes she knows me so well it gets to be*
depressing, he thought. Now she glanced back. "You are still thinking about it, then."

"I'm not," he said, exasperated. "Can't a man lose three pounds in peace? You keep saying you
like me a little ..." *thinner*

"... a little less beefy." Now she had gotten him thinking about the Gypsy again. *Dammit!* The
Gypsy's eaten nose and the scaly feel of that one finger sliding along his cheek in the moment before
he had reacted and jerked away—the way you would jerk away from a spider or from a clattering
bundle of beetles fuming in a knot under a rotted log.

She brought him the bacon and kissed his temple. "I'm sorry. You go right ahead and lose some

weight. But if you don't, remember what Mr. Rogers says—"

"—I like you just the way you are," they finished in unison.

He prodded at the overturned Journal by the lazy Susan, but that was just too depressing. He got up, went outside, and found the *New York Times* in the flowerbed. The kid always threw it in the flowerbed, never had his numbers right at the end of the week, could never remember Bill's last name. Billy had wondered on more than one occasion if it was possible for a twelve-year-old kid to become a victim of Alzheimer's disease.

He took the paper back inside, opened it to the sports, and ate the bacon. He was deep in the box scores when Heidi brought him another half of English muffin, golden with melting butter.

Halleck ate it almost without being aware he was doing so.

CHAPTER 2: 245

In the city, a damage suit that had dragged on for over three years—a suit he had expected to drag on in one shape or another for the next three or four years—came to an unexpected and gratifying end in midmorning, with the plaintiff agreeing during a court recess to settle for an amount that was nothing short of stupefying. Halleck lost no time getting said plaintiff, a paint manufacturer from Schenectady, and his client to sign a letter of good intent in the judge's chambers. The plaintiff's lawyer had looked on with palpable dismay and disbelief while his client, president of the Good Luck Paint Company, scratched his name on six copies of the letter and as the court clerk notarized copies after copy, his bald head gleaming mellowly. Billy sat quietly, hands folded in his lap, feeling as if he had won the New York lottery. By lunch hour it was all over but the shouting.

Billy took himself and the client to O'Lunney's, ordered Chivas in a water glass for the client and a martini for himself, and then called Heidi at home.

"Mohonk," he said when she picked up the phone. It was a rambling upstate New York resort where they had spent their honeymoon—a gift from Heidi's parents—a long, long time ago. Both of them had fallen in love with the place, and they had spent two vacations there since.

"What?"

"Mohonk," he repeated. "If you don't want to go, I'll ask Jillian from the office."

"No, you won't! Billy, what is this?"

"Do you want to go or not?"

"Of *course* I do! This weekend?"

"Tomorrow, if you can get Mrs. Bean to come in and check on Linda and make sure the wash gets done and that there aren't any orgies going on in front of the TV in the family room. And if—"

But Heidi's squeal temporarily drowned him out. "Your case, Billy! The paint fumes and the nervous breakdown and the psychotic episode and—"

"Canley is going to settle. In fact, Canley has settled. After about fourteen years of boardroom bullshit and long legal opinions meaning exactly nothing, your husband has finally won one for the good guys. Clearly, decisively, and without a doubt. Canley's settled, and I'm on top of the world."

"Billy! God!" She squealed again, this time so loud the phone distorted. Billy held it away from his ear, grinning. "How much is your guy getting?"

Billy named the figure and this time he had to hold the phone away from his ear for almost five seconds.

"Will Linda mind us taking five days off, do you think?"

"When she can stay up until one watching HBO late-night and have Georgia Deever over and both of them can talk about boys while they gorge themselves on my chocolates? Are you kidding? Will she be cold up there this time of year, Billy? Do you want me to pack your green cardigan? Do you want your parka or your denim jacket? Or both? Do you—?"

He told her to use her judgment and went back to his client. The client was already halfway through his huge glass of Chivas and wanted to tell Polish jokes. The client looked as if he had been hit with a hammer. Halleck drank his martini and listened to standard witticisms about Polish carpenters and Polish restaurants with half an ear, his mind clicking cheerily away on other matters. The case could have far-reaching implications; it was too soon to say it was going to change the course of his career.

but it might. It very well might. Not bad for the sort of case big firms take on as charity work. It could mean that—

—the first thud jolts Heidi forward and for a moment she squeezes him; he is faintly aware of pain in his groin. The jolt is hard enough to make her seat belt lock. Blood flies up—three dime size drops—and splatters on the windshield like red rain. She hasn't even had time to begin to scream; she will scream later. He hasn't had time to even begin to realize. The beginning of realization comes with the second thud. And he—

—swallowed the rest of his martini at a gulp. Tears came to his eyes.

“You okay?” the client, David Duganfield by name, asked.

“I'm so okay you wouldn't believe it,” Billy said, and reached across the table to his client. “Congratulations, David.” He would not think about the accident, he would not think about the Gypsy with the rotting nose. He was one of the good guys; that fact was apparent in Duganfield's strong grip and his tired, slightly sappy smile.

“Thank you, man,” Duganfield said. “Thank you so much.” He suddenly leaned over the table and clumsily embraced Billy Halleck. Billy hugged him back. But as David Duganfield's arms went around his neck, one palm slipped up the angle of his cheek and he thought again of the old Gypsy man's weird caress.

He touched me, Halleck thought, and even as he hugged his client, he shivered.

* * *

He tried to think about David Duganfield on the way home—Duganfield was a good thing to think about—but instead of Duganfield he found himself thinking about Ginelli by the time he was on the Triborough Bridge.

He and Duganfield had spent most of the afternoon in O'Lunney's, but Billy's first impulse had been to take his client to Three Brothers, the restaurant in which Richard Ginelli held an informal silent partnership. It had been years now since he had actually been in the Brothers—with Ginelli's reputation it would not have been wise—but it was the Brothers he always thought of first, still. Billy had had some good meals and good times there, although Heidi had never cared much for the place for Ginelli. Ginelli frightened her, Billy thought.

He was passing the Gun Hill Road exit on the New York Thruway when his thoughts led back to the old Gypsy man as predictably as a horse going back into its barn.

It was Ginelli you thought of first. When you got home that day and Heidi was sitting out in the kitchen, crying, it was Ginelli you thought of first. “Hey, Rich, I killed an old lady today. Can I come into town and talk to you?”

But Heidi was in the next room, and Heidi would not have understood. Billy's hand hovered over the telephone and then fell away. It occurred to him with sudden clarity that he was a well-to-do lawyer from Connecticut who, when things got hairy, could think of only one person to call: a New York hoodlum who had apparently developed the habit of shooting the competition over the years.

Ginelli was tall, not terribly good-looking, but a natural clothes horse. His voice was strong and kind—not the sort of voice one would associate with dope, vice, and murder. He was associated with all three, if you believed his rap sheet. But it had been Ginelli's voice Billy wanted to hear on that terrible afternoon after Duncan Hopley, the Fairview chief of police, had let him go.

“—or just sit there all day?”

“Huh!” Billy said, startled. He realized he was sitting in one of the few booths at the Rye toll plaza actually staffed by a human being.

“I said, are you going to pay or just—?”

“Okay,” Billy said, and gave the toll-taker a dollar. He got his change and drove on. Almost to Connecticut; nineteen exits to go to Heidi. Then off to Mohonk. Duganfield wasn’t working as a diversion; so try Mohonk. Just let’s forget the old Gypsy woman and the old Gypsy man for a while, what say?

But it was Ginelli his thoughts drifted back to.

Billy had met him through the firm, which had done some legal work for Ginelli seven years ago—incorporation work. Billy, then a very junior lawyer with the firm, had been given the assignment. None of the senior partners would have touched it. Even then Rich Ginelli’s reputation had been very bad. Billy had never asked Kirk Penschley why the firm had taken Ginelli on as a client at all; he would have been told to go peddle his papers and leave questions of policy to his elders. He supposed Ginelli had known about a skeleton in someone’s closet; he was a man who kept his ear to the ground.

Billy had begun his three months’ work on behalf of Three Brothers Associates, Inc., expecting to dislike and perhaps fear the man he was working for. Instead, he found himself drawn to him. Ginelli was charismatic, fun to be around. More, he treated Billy himself with a dignity and respect which Billy would not find in his own firm for another four years.

Billy slowed for the Norwalk tolls, tossed in thirty-five cents, and pulled back into traffic. Without even thinking about it, he leaned over and opened the glove-compartment. Under the maps and the owner’s manual were two packages of Twinkies. He opened one and began to eat rapidly, a few crumbs spilling down onto his vest.

All of his work for Ginelli had been completed long before a New York grand jury had indicted the man for ordering a wave of gangland-style executions in the wake of a drug war. The indictments had come down from New York Superior Court in the fall of 1980. They were buried in the spring of 1981, due mostly to a fifty-percent mortality rate among the state’s witnesses. One had been blown up in his car along with two of the three police detectives who had been assigned to protect him. Another had been stabbed through the throat with the broken-off handle of an umbrella as he sat in a Grand Central Station shoeshine chair. The two other keys decided, not so surprisingly, that they could no longer be sure it was Richie “The Hammer” Ginelli they had overheard giving the orders to kill a Brooklyn doctor named Richovsky.

Westport. Southport. Almost home. He was leaning over again, feeling around in the glove compartment . . . Aha! Here was an only partially consumed packet of airline peanuts. Stale, but edible. Billy Halleck began to munch them, tasting them no more than he had tasted the Twinkies.

He and Ginelli had exchanged Christmas cards over the years and had gotten together for the occasional meal, usually at Three Brothers. Following what Ginelli stolidly referred to as “my leg problems,” the meals ceased. Part of that was Heidi’s doing—she had developed into a world-class nag when it came to Ginelli—but part of it had also been Ginelli’s.

“You better stop coming around for a while,” he had told Billy.

“What? Why?” Billy had asked innocently, just as if he and Heidi had not argued over this very thing the night before.

“Because as far as the world is concerned, I am a gangster,” Ginelli had replied. “Young lawyers who associate with gangsters do not get ahead, William, and that’s what it’s really all about—keeping your nose clean and getting ahead.”

“That’s what it’s all about, huh?”

Ginelli had smiled strangely. “Well . . . there are a few other things.”

“Such as?”

“William, I hope you never have to find out. And come around for espresso once in a while. We’ve got some talk and some laughs. Keep in touch, is what I’m saying.”

And so he had kept in touch, and had dropped in from time to time (although, he admitted to himself as he swung up the Fairview exit ramp, the intervals had grown longer and longer), and when he had found himself faced with what might be a charge—of negligent vehicular manslaughter, it had been Ginelli he thought of first.

But good old tit-grabbing Cary Rossington took care of that, his mind whispered. So why are you thinking about Ginelli now? Mohonk—that’s what you ought to be thinking of. And David Duganfield, who proves that nice guys don’t always finish last. And taking off a few more pounds.

But as he turned into the driveway, what he found himself thinking about was something Ginelli had said: *William, I hope you never have to find out.*

Find out what? Billy wondered, and then Heidi was flying out the front door to kiss him, and Billy forgot everything for a while.

CHAPTER 3: Mohonk

It was their third night at Mohonk and they had just finished making love. It was the sixth time three days, a giddy change from their usual sedate twice-a-week pace. Billy lay beside her, liking the feel of her heat, liking the smell of her perfume—Anaïs Anaïs—mixed with her clean sweat and the smell of their sex. For a moment the thought made a hideous cross-connection and he was seeing the Gypsy woman in the moment before the Olds struck her. For a moment he heard a bottle of Perrier shattering. Then the vision was gone.

He rolled toward his wife and hugged her tight.

She hugged him back one-armed and slipped her free hand up his thigh. “You know,” she said, “if I come my brains out one more time, I’m not going to have any brains left.”

“It’s a myth,” Billy said, grinning.

“That you can come your brains out?”

“Nah. That’s the truth. The myth is that you lose those brain cells forever. The ones you come out of always grow back.”

“Yeah, you say, you say.”

She snuggled more comfortably against him. Her hand wandered up from his thigh, touched his penis lightly and lovingly, toyed with the thatch of his pubic hair (last year he’d been sadly astounded to see the first threads of gray down there in what his father had called Adam’s thicket), and then slipped up the foothill of his lower belly.

She sat up suddenly on her elbows, startling him a little. He hadn’t been asleep, but he had been drifting toward it.

“You really *have* lost weight!”

“Huh?”

“Billy Halleck, you’re skinnier!”

He slapped his belly, which he sometimes called the House That Budweiser Built, and laughed. “Not much. I still look like the world’s only seven-months-pregnant man.”

“You’re still big, but not as big as you were. I know. I can tell. When did you weigh yourself last?”

He cast his mind back. It had been the morning Canley had settled. He had been down to 246. “I told you I’d lost three pounds, remember?”

“Well, you weigh yourself again first thing in the morning,” she said.

“No scales in the bathroom,” Halleck said comfortably.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Mohonk’s a *civilized* place.”

“We’ll find one.”

He was beginning to drift again. “If you want, sure.”

“I want.”

She had been a good wife, he thought. At odd times over the last five years, since the steady weight gain had really started to show, he had announced diets and/or physical-fitness programs. The diets had been marked by a lot of cheating. A hot dog or two in the early afternoon to supplement the yogurt lunch, or maybe a hastily gobbled hamburger or two on a Saturday afternoon, while Heidi was out at an auction or a yard sale. Once or twice he had even stooped to the hideous hot sandwiches available

at the little convenience store a mile down the road—the meat in these sandwiches usually looked like toasted skin grafts once the microwave had had its way with them, and yet he could never remember throwing away a portion uneaten. He liked his beer, all right, that was a given, but even more than that, he liked to eat. Dover sole in one of New York’s finer restaurants was great, but if he was sitting up and watching the Mets on TV, a bag of Doritos with some clam dip on the side would do.

The physical-fitness programs would last maybe a week, and then his work schedule would interfere, or he would simply lose interest. In the basement a set of weights sat brooding in a corner gathering cobwebs and rust. They seemed to reproach him every time he went down. He tried not to look at them.

So he would suck in his gut even more than usual and announce boldly to Heidi that he had lost twelve pounds and was down to 236. And she would nod and tell him that she was very glad, of course she could see the difference, and all the time she would know, because she saw the empty Doritos bags (or bags) in the trash. And since Connecticut had adopted a returnable bottle-and-can law, the empties in the pantry had become a source of guilt almost as great as the unused weights.

She saw him when he was sleeping; even worse, she saw him when he was peeing. You couldn’t suck in your gut when you were taking a piss. He had tried and it just wasn’t possible. She knew he had lost three pounds, four at most. You could fool your wife about another woman—at least for a while—but not about your weight. A woman who bore that weight from time to time in the night knew what you weighed. But she smiled and said *Of course you look better, dear*. Part of it was maybe not so admirable—it kept him quiet about her cigarettes—but he was not fooled into believing that was all of it, or even most of it. It was a way of letting him keep his self-respect.

“Billy?”

“What?” Jerked back from sleep a second time, he glanced over at her, a little amused, a little irritated.

“Do you feel quite well?”

“I feel fine. What’s this ‘do-you-feel-quite-well’ stuff?”

“Well . . . sometimes . . . they say an unplanned weight loss can be a sign of something.”

“I feel *great*. And if you don’t let me go to sleep, I’ll prove it by jumping your bones again.”

“Go ahead.”

He groaned. She laughed. Soon enough they slept. And in his dream, he and Heidi were coming back from the Shop ’n Save, only he *knew* it was a dream this time, he *knew* what was going to happen and he wanted to tell her to stop what she was doing, that he had to concentrate all his attention on her driving because pretty soon an old Gypsy woman was going to dart out from between two parked cars—from between a yellow Subaru and a dark green Firebird, to be exact—and this old woman was going to have a child’s five-and-dime plastic barrettes in her graying grizzled hair and she was not going to be looking anywhere but straight ahead. He wanted to tell Heidi that this was his chance to take it all back, to change it, to make it right.

But he couldn’t speak. The pleasure woke again at the touch of her fingers, playful at first, then more serious (his penis stiffened as he slept and he turned his head slightly at the metallic clicking sound of his zipper going down notch by notch); the pleasure mixed uneasily with a feeling of terrible inevitability. Now he saw the yellow Subaru ahead, parked behind the green Firebird with the white racing stripe. And from between them a flash of pagan color brighter and more vital than any paint job sprayed on in Detroit or the Toyota Village. He tried to scream *Quit it, Heidi! It’s her! I’m going to kill her again if you don’t quit it! Please, God, no! Please, good Christ, no!*

But the figure stepped out between the two cars. Halleck was trying to get his foot off the gas ped

and put it on the brake, but it seemed to be stuck right where it was, held down with a dreadful irrevocable firmness. *The Krazy Glue of inevitability*, he thought wildly, trying to turn the wheel, but the wheel wouldn't turn, either. The wheel was locked and blocked. So he tried to brace himself for the crash and then the Gypsy's head turned and it wasn't the old woman, oh no, huh-uh, it was the Gypsy man with the rotted nose. Only now his eyes were gone. In the instant before the Olds struck him and bore him under, Halleck saw the empty, staring sockets. The old Gypsy man's lips spread in an obscene grin—an ancient crescent below the rotted horror of his nose.

Then: *Thud/thud*.

One hand flailing limply up above the Olds's hood, heavily wrinkled, dressed in pagan rings of beaten metal. Three drops of blood splattered the windshield. Halleck was vaguely aware that Heidi's hand had clenched agonizingly on his erection, retaining the orgasm that shock had brought on, creating a sudden dreadful pleasure-pain....

And he heard the Gypsy's whisper from somewhere underneath him, drifting up through the carpeted floor of the expensive car, muffled but clear enough: "*Thinner.*"

He came awake with a jerk, turned toward the window, and almost screamed. The moon was a brilliant crescent above the Catskills, and for a moment he thought it was the old Gypsy man, his head cocked slightly to the side, peering into their window, his eyes two brilliant stars in the blackness of the sky over upstate New York, his grin lit somehow from within, the light spilling out cold like the light from a mason jar filled with August fireflies, cold like the swamp-fellas he had sometimes seen as a boy in North Carolina—old, cold light, a moon in the shape of an ancient grin, one which contemplates revenge.

Billy drew in a shaky breath, closed his eyes tight, then opened them again. The moon was just the moon again. He lay down and was asleep three minutes later.

The new day was bright and clear, and Halleck finally gave in and agreed to climb the Labyrinth Trail with his wife. Mohonk's grounds were laced with hiking trails, rated from easy to extremely difficult. Labyrinth was rated "moderate," and on their honeymoon he and Heidi had climbed it twice. He remembered how much pleasure that had given him—working his way up the steep defiles with Heidi right behind him, laughing and telling him to hurry up, slowpoke. He remembered worming through one of the narrow, cavelike passages in the rock, and whispering ominously to his new wife, "Do you feel the ground shaking?" when they were in the narrowest part. It had been narrow, but she had still managed to give his butt a pretty good swat.

Halleck would admit to himself (but never, never to Heidi) that it was those narrow passages through the rock that worried him now. On their honeymoon he had been slim and trim, only a kid still in good shape from summers spent on a logging crew in western Massachusetts. Now he was sixteen years older and a lot heavier. And, as jolly old Dr. Houston had so kindly informed him, he was entering heart-attack country. The idea of having a heart attack halfway up the mountain was uncomfortable but still fairly remote; what seemed more possible to him was getting stuck in one of those narrow stone throats through which the trail snaked on its way to the top. He could remember that they'd had to crawl in at least four places.

He didn't want to get stuck in one of those places. Or ... how's this, gang? Ole Billy Halleck gets stuck in one of those dark crawly places and then has a heart attack! Heyyyy! Two for the price of one!

But he finally agreed to give it a try, if *she* would agree to go on by herself if he was simply not in good enough shape to make it to the top. And if they could go down to New Paltz first so he could buy

some sneakers. Heidi agreed willingly to both stipulations.

In town, Halleck found that “sneakers” had become *declassé*. No one would even admit remembering the word. He bought a pair of dandy green-and-silver Nike walking-and-climbing shoes and was quietly delighted at how good they felt on his feet. That led to the realization that he hadn’t owned a pair of canvas shoes in ... Five years? Six? It seemed impossible, but there it was.

Heidi admired them and told him again that he certainly *did* look as if he had lost weight. Outside the shoe store was a penny weighing machine, one of those that advertises “YOUR WASTE AND FATE.” Halleck hadn’t seen one since he was a kid.

“Hop up, hero,” Heidi said. “I’ve got a penny.”

Halleck held back for a moment, obscurely nervous.

“Come on, hurry up. I want to see how much you’ve lost.”

“Heidi, those things don’t weigh true, you know that.”

“A ballpark figure’s all I want. Come *on*, Billy—don’t be a poop.”

He reluctantly gave her the package containing his new shoes and stepped up on the scale. She put the penny in. There was a clunk and then two curved silvery metal panels drew back. Behind the top one was his waste; behind the lower one, the machine’s idea of his fate. Halleck drew in a harsh, surprised breath.

“I *knew* it!” Heidi was saying beside him. There was a kind of doubtful wonder in her voice, as she was not sure if she should feel happiness or fear or wonder. “I *knew* you were thinner!”

If she had heard his own harsh gasp, Halleck thought later, she no doubt thought it was because of the number at which the scale had red-lined—even with all his clothes on, and his Swiss army knife in the pocket of his corduroy pants, even with a hearty Mohonk breakfast in his belly, that line was centered neatly at 232. He had lost fourteen pounds since the day Canley had settled out of court.

But it wasn’t his waste that had made him gasp; it was his fate. The lower panel had not slid aside to reveal FINANCIAL MATTERS WILL SOON IMPROVE OR OLD FRIENDS WILL VISIT OR DO NOT MAKE IMPORTANT DECISION HASTILY.

It had revealed a single black word: “THINNER.”

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They rode back to Fairview mostly in silence, Heidi driving until they were within fifteen miles of New York City and the traffic got heavy. Then she pulled into a service plaza and let Billy take the rest of the way home. No reason why he should not be driving; the old woman had been killed, true enough, one arm almost torn from her body, her pelvis pulverized, her skull shattered like a Ming vase hurled onto a marble floor, but Billy Halleck had not lost a single point from his Connecticut driver's license. Good old tit-grabbing Cary Rossington had seen to that.

"Did you hear me, Billy?"

He glanced at her for only a second, then returned his eyes to the road. He was driving better these days, and although he didn't use his horn any more than he used to, or shout and wave his arms any more than he used to, he was more aware of other drivers' errors and his own than he ever had been before, and was less forgiving of both. Killing an old woman did wonders for your concentration. It didn't do shit for your self-respect, and it produced some really hideous dreams, but it certainly did juice up the old concentration levels.

"I was woolgathering. Sorry."

"I just said thank you for a wonderful time."

She smiled at him and touched his arm briefly. It had been a wonderful time—for Heidi, at least. Heidi had indubitably Put It Behind Her—the Gypsy woman, the preliminary hearing at which the state's case had been dismissed, the old Gypsy man with the rotted nose. For Heidi it was now just an unpleasantness in the past, like Billy's friendship with that wop hoodlum from New York. But something else was on her mind; a second quick side glance confirmed it. The smile had faded and she was looking at him and tiny wrinkles around her eyes showed.

"You're welcome," he said. "You're *always* welcome, babe."

"And when we get home—"

"I'll jump your bones again!" he cried with bogus enthusiasm, and manufactured a leer. Actually, he didn't think he could get it up if the Dallas Cowgirls paraded past him in lingerie designed by Frederick's of Hollywood. It had nothing to do with how often they had made it up at Mohonk; it was that damned fortune. THINNER. Surely it had said no such thing—it had been his imagination. But it hadn't *seemed* like his imagination, dammit; it had seemed as real as a New York Times headline. And that very reality was the terrible part of it, because THINNER wasn't *anybody's* idea of a fortune. Even YOUR FATE IS TO SOON LOSE WASTE didn't really make it. Fortune writers were into things like long journeys and meeting old friends.

Ergo, he had hallucinated it.

Yep, that's right.

Ergo, he was probably losing his marbles.

Oh, come on, now, is that fair?

Fair enough. When your imagination got out of control, it wasn't good news.

"You can jump me if you want to," Heidi said, "but what I really want is for you to jump on our bathroom scales—"

"Come on, Heidi! I lost some weight, no big deal!"

"I'm very proud of you for losing some weight, Billy, but we've been together almost constantly for

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